

TOP of MIND

Analytical Ideation: Power Brainstorming

By Robert J. Morais

Old news. Military intelligence. Analytical ideation. Like these other oxymorons, analytical ideation appears at first glance to be a contradiction in terms. However, as a marketing practice, it can spark strategic insights and innovative advertising concepts. It enhances the working partnership between marketers and their ad agencies. Perhaps most importantly, it responds to a common criticism of ideation sessions: what to do with all those great ideas!

Everyone who has participated in an ideation session knows the cardinal rules: Be positive. Build on the ideas of others. Get as many ideas on the wall as possible. Don't stop for evaluation and analysis; that will be done offline by a smaller, select group. Analytical ideation embraces the openness and rapid idea generation of traditional idea sessions, but utilizes sharply honed analytical tools that provide a strategic rudder. The technique demonstrates the virtue of being inventive and systematic at the same time.

The ideal session includes 12-15 junior and senior level executives in marketing, account management, creative and media. Whenever possible, outside guests with relevant experience—be it corporate R&D or broad cultural trend analysis—sit in. The goal: to assemble a group of people not only fresh to the task at hand, but who also possess special knowledge or insights.

Analytical ideation starts with a clear objective. Because the technique is strategic in intent, the objective must be well focused; e.g., better define the character of the target audience. Next, a top-line brand audit should include a look at the marketplace, the competition, a brand's strengths and weaknesses, and pertinent demographics and psychographics to provide an underpinning that ensures the session stays rooted in real world market facts as it soars to ideational heights.

At first, the session will resemble "classic" ideation, starting with a fast-paced "brain dump" of impressions and prejudices held by participants about a particular brand equity. Within minutes, the group's words and phrases fill pages of easel sheets, an exercise that's repeated until the walls of the room are filled with ideas.

Where analytical ideation stands apart is that the group is next led through a burrowing process where the ideas conceived are explored more deeply. To achieve this, a *semantic chain* exercise builds upon the words and phrases with particular salience. If, for example, the aim is to better define an over-the-counter drug's brand equity and one of the descriptors is "doctor's recommendation," the group will discuss the phrase and what it means to both consumer and professional targets. This exploration elicits both rational and emotional connections and generates a fuller description of this aspect of brand equity than ever

garnered previously. Additional equity descriptors should also be analyzed in this manner.

Next, the group might be exposed to cultural trends and asked to make linkages between them and brand usage or target characteristics. Thus, "doctor's recommendation" could link to such trends as self-medication and the increasingly informed and mutually respectful dialogue

between doctors and patients. Teams may also try to address typical category problems; i.e., create solutions, and wishes for, what to do when 6-year-old Johnnie wakes up with a cold at 4 a.m. Another exercise, *triadic sorting*, asks participants to contrast attributes of two brands with a third, continually shifting the pairs to arrive at new ways of differentiating a brand from competitors. Further evaluation leads teams to craft new statements that express the brand's equity or identity.

Unlike traditional ideation, the group has drilled deeply into marketing-rich words, phrases and ideas with agreement reached on the most promising ideas and strategic statements. New research questions are on the table—a critical outcome since the session is largely impressionistic and many of the insights will need to be confirmed or amended in customer-based research. Additionally, the process has brought together people who seldom, if ever, work so closely or so intensely on the most critical issues surrounding a brand.

Analytical ideation. It may sound like an intellectual roadblock. Rather, it is a way to open up avenues that take brands further than anyone has ever imagined. ■

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