This article is the third in a three-part series looking at ways to improve the success rate of idea generation sessions.

In Part 1, we defined the term ideation as the creative process of generating and developing new ideas. They differ from brainstorming in that they predictably generate ideas that can make a real business impact while engaging participants in a positive way. Part 1 covered four actions to help you prepare for an ideation:

1. Be clear on the aims and deliverables
2. Identify and recruit the right participants
3. Plan the workshop process
4. Select the right tools and prepare good stimulus

However, in spite of even the best planning and preparation, it’s still possible for the live workshop to go slightly off course. Therefore, in Part 2, we provided best practice facilitation tips. We identified six ideation killers and a series of in-flight adjustments to ensure that you generate a high volume of good ideas.

In Part 3, we now look at the key steps to be taken in the first few weeks after ideation sessions to ensure that the output has a real business impact. The project team get the first glimpse of their future products, services and business opportunities - there’s a real buzz in the air. The project becomes more tangible to its stakeholders.

However, all too often the post-ideation excitement is dulled by the harsh reality that the high volume of raw ideas need to be prioritised and developed into valuable business opportunities. The pressure is on and the team know it. Stakeholders expect swift and disciplined action.

To provide you with a structured way of working, we have arranged our advice as a set of tasks, something you can quickly work through to develop the best ideas during the first few weeks following the ideation. By no means is this intended to be a definitive guide to what to do after an ideation – you may simply not have time to tick all the boxes, your context will be specific to your situation, and of course, since ideation is only one stage within a wider innovation process, it is likely that you will have different objectives and priorities. However, employing some of the practical tips that follow should provide you with a structured way of working, to save you time and improve the quality of your ideas.

TIPS

1. Use structured templates to capture the ideas

The use of templates is recommended to provide focus and enable comparability between alternative ideas. In the hours after the ideation, try to ensure the ideas are written up in standardised Idea templates of typically one page. A delay of a few days increases the risk that you’ll forget the details of the ideas or indeed what they were!

Innovation is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

Thomas Edison
The templates force a focus on the most important aspects of the idea, e.g. the concept, its target market, how it makes money, the company fit and any follow-up questions or validation steps. Using templates also builds a shared understanding among the team as to what the ideas mean.

Your choice of template headings will depend on the types of ideas. For example, an idea template for online energy services will be different to one for active packaging technologies, which in turn will be different for HR culture change ideas.

2. Cluster ideas into bigger and better ideas

The written-up raw ideas are used as source material for a clustering process, where complementary groups of ideas are combined to form the basis of a new, compelling idea. Clustering generates ideas that are significantly stronger than the individual raw components, giving them a greater probability of eventual success. The clustering exercise takes place over a few hours to days:

- Review the raw ideas and identify common themes. This may take a couple iterations, and includes removing the weaker ideas, to leave something like 30% of the original number of ideas.
- Map the raw ideas into themes, keeping in mind that ideas can form part of several themes.
- Involve a mix of participants and employ lateral thinking skills. By using the analogy of someone looking at a 3D stereogram image in order to reveal a hidden 3D image, shift your perspective when looking at the raw data in order to spot the 1+1=3 ideas. Simultaneously zoom in and out on the specifics while considering the bigger picture from combinations of ideas. Clusters of stronger ideas will start to emerge from this exercise.
- Write up the idea clusters onto two or three page templates following the same topics as the ‘Idea template’, but containing more detail and evidence to substantiate the idea – for example via published research or the identification of relevant precedents in other industries or markets.
3. Build stronger ideas and prepare for the steering group (i.e. the first formal filter)

Knowledge gaps always exist, and you will need to identify research evidence to substantiate the legitimacy of the ideas. But be careful not to overdo it with a list of 1,000 questions.

Carry out initial research using internal or secondary sources to confirm or refine the hypotheses and to refine precedents that suggest that the idea can work. This can be done using secondary research, interviews, online surveys, consumer co-creation groups, technology assessments, intellectual property scans, etc.

"Nothing will even be attempted if all possible objections must first be overcome."  
Samuel Johnson

It is also important even at this early stage to assess your business’s right to play in that market and the capability to deliver (or can credibly secure the capabilities to deliver). Many innovation programmes uncover a high proportion of opportunities that other businesses are better qualified to exploit; these should only be taken forward if you can identify a suitable partner to work with or have the appetite to invest in building new capabilities.

By this stage, your raw ideas have been written up as stronger ideas and the first steps of research and validation have been completed. The next step involves iteratively building the ideas. Carry out a challenge session with the project team and suitable other staff and external experts to stress-test the ideas and identify any additional areas of research. This may take several iterations as the ideas are challenged and rebuilt.

Prepare to present the refined ideas to a steering group. This should include the team’s own recommendations to the steering group by assessing and comparing ideas against agreed criteria to ensure correct prioritisation and alignment with wider company objectives. Assessment criteria should be agreed in every case, but often a form of risk and reward framework is effective.

The duration of the above activities depends not only on available people, experience and budget, but the type of ideas and how closely they fit with your core business. For example, ideas that are less familiar to your organisation (i.e. new ideas targeting new market areas) require a lot more time and resource to develop. Without background knowledge of the new markets, you may also need to allow sufficient time for the steering group to get to grips with the content. Circulating background reading notes as well as scheduling meetings with individual steering group members can be beneficial.

4. Present recommendations to the steering group

Ideas should be presented clearly to avoid good ideas being lost through bad communication - it’s not unheard of for a project to waste weeks recovering from the side effects of having poorly communicated ideas. So put time aside to prepare and rehearse.

The project steering group formally screens and assesses a number of ideas to agree (1) which ones will be progressed, (2) which require re-work and (3) which are to be dropped. These last two categories are key – it is essential to cut the weaker opportunities in order to free up capacity to progress the stronger ones, or indeed to return seconded project staff to their host departments. Specifically, the ‘re-work’ category should be used sparingly and with a clear enunciation of what work the steering group wants to be performed before the opportunity is represented.

‘Re-work’ cannot drift into a soft option to avoid saying ‘No’ to a project team – dropping ideas is a necessary part of a successful innovation programme, and should not be regarded as failure on the part of individuals associated with that opportunity. On the contrary, the sooner a weak idea is identified and dropped, the sooner less investment will have been made in it, and the better will be the overall programme returns. Market testing, financial modelling and implementation planning are time-consuming and expensive activities that should only be invested against opportunities with genuine value creation potential. A typical steering group might progress somewhere between 25% and 50% of the ideas presented by an innovation team for their review.

The ideas to be progressed are now subjected to much more intense research and development in what is probably the most important and value adding stage of the innovation process – and the stage most often performed poorly, as the emphasis switches to commercial and delivery capabilities rather than the more exploratory and creative skills needed for the earlier stages.

CONCLUSIONS

Hopefully these tips will help you help to maximise the impact of your ideations by applying a structured approach during the days and first few weeks following your ideation workshops to translate the raw ideas into early-stage business ideas.