

INNOVATION:
Lessons from Einstein to Change Your Thinking
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Probably one of the most powerful quotes I ever heard was not by Einstein, but by John Dewey: “Minds are like parachutes; they only function when open.” That statement serves as a reminder that in order to grow in any capacity, we first have to be open to new ideas. We cannot embark on a journey to innovative solutions if we are closed-minded or resistant to change.

The more we cling to what we believe, the less likely we are to experience mental flexibility. Holding on to old paradigms eventually turns them into anchors that impede our progress.

So, exactly how can we become more cerebrally supple? By being zealously curious about everything. Albert Einstein once confessed in a moment of self-effacement, “I have no special gift. I am only passionately curious.” He probably believed it, thinking he succeeded where others failed purely because of his indefatigable curiosity. What modesty. The truth is innovation happens when others who have worked on the problem give up, long before they solve it. Although many inventions and innovations may have occurred to someone spontaneously or by accident, usually there were many years of experimentation, research, and analysis that preceded the discovery. Often, the indisputable reason is that persistence and perseverance were critical factors in the project’s ultimate success. Einstein certainly agreed with this when he said, “It’s not that I’m so smart; it’s just that I stay with problems longer.”

Those tireless inventors, whether in product development, technology, or business don’t easily succumb to the status quo. They constantly question what is conventional and ask why it is that way. Instead of complaining about an inconvenient and inherent product flaw, they design a solution. Look at all these products: new sweeteners, Dove ice cream bars, aloe-rich tissues, online courses, interactive billboards, Web-enabled cell phones, and user-generated or audience-created content. Every one of these innovations is an example of the S-C-A-M-P-E-R principle, an idea-generating, acronym-based technique that’s easy to use. Each letter represents the first in a word that explains a different solution to a problem. Let’s look at them one at a time and see how they ignited ingenious thinking, resulting in new innovations.

S – Substitute

First there was sugar, also called sucrose. Then came saccharin, packaged as Sweet ‘N Low, followed by aspartame as the product Equal. Now there’s another sugar substitute: Splenda. Why all these substitutes? Because each one solved a specific problem. Sweet ‘N Low, an artificial sugar, reduced calories and offered a safe sweetener for diabetics. Equal was the answer to the carcinogenic scare of saccharin. Sucralose, known as Splenda, stepped in as an alternative to the suspected mental impairment related to Equal. The point here is that the products were designed to allow people to substitute one sweetener for another of their choice.

C – Combine

Dove ice cream bars combined two delicious treats: rich chocolate bars and creamy ice cream. Chocolate covered ice cream existed before Dove bars, but didn't offer the famous richness associated with Dove chocolate. Ben & Jerry's also used the combination technique when it created "the Cone." It packaged two of its most popular flavors, Cherry Garcia and Cookie Dough, not just as quarts, but also as cones. Although drumstick ice cream cones existed before this, they didn't come in exotic Ben & Jerry's flavors.

A – Add

Severe cold sufferers, who wiped their noses so frequently they became red and sore, quickly loved Puffs Plus, an aloe-rich tissue, which was much softer on the skin. Consider how many years people suffered with painful noses until the Eureka! moment came to a product developer. The simple addition of aloe made the miserable effects of the ubiquitous cold somewhat more bearable.

M – Modify

With everyone's busy schedules, getting an education became more attainable by modifying degree-required university curricula into online courses. This time- and space-shifted how, when, and where people learned. It moved education from set, scheduled times and locations to courses personally arranged at the students' convenience in a cyberspace environment.

P – Put to other uses

Billboards found on city streets and along highways used to be oversized, outdoor signs. Now they are examples of interactive, ambient media. People can send text messages or download music files on their cell phones, as the 2006 Times Square Absolut board showed, which offered passersby a free, 4-minute Lenny Kravitz mp3 downloadable track.

E – Eliminate

Web-enabled cell phones allowed people to go online without a computer. They provided Web access for a highly mobile society by eliminating a second device or the need to be deskbound and freeing Web surfers to carry the Internet in their pockets for instant, anywhere entrée.

R – Reverse or rearrange

For years companies turned to advertising agencies to create their marketing messages. Today, agencies are developing interactive campaigns that encourage consumer participation through user-generated or audience-created content. When Dove soap wanted to engage the audience, it asked women to create TV commercials showing how they felt about the beauty bar. Several television spots were selected from the submissions. The winning entries aired on the Oscars, which was chosen for its strong female audience. It is evident that companies now are reversing the consumers' role and inviting them to create advertising messages for their products.

So how can the S-C-A-M-P-E-R principle help you develop original solutions? By looking at what exists and modifying it in some way. It could be the way your operating systems work. Perhaps eliminating one unnecessary step will save your employees time and increase productivity. Maybe adding a new department or service will expand your target audience. Possibly modifying the way your audience accesses your services, as in the case of ATM machines, will provide greater accessibility.

The fact is Einstein was right when he said, “No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it.” You have to shift your thinking to look at problems from a new perspective to see solutions that, once discovered, like Post-It® Notes, seem remarkably indispensable. It is quite obvious that the same thinking leads to the same results. By re-examining or reframing the question, a new solution may well appear.

Activating your creativity is like training any muscle. It’s a matter of taking your brain to the gym. Just as your body atrophies without use, your mental acuity, and thus your ability to solve problems, think strategically, and develop inventive ideas, diminishes without activity. Constantly challenge yourself to find answers where others simply ask questions, to integrate new technologies into a novel environment, or to try new approaches to long-standing, unresolved difficulties.

Become more observant of others’ solutions to similar a problem. How did they successfully tackle this issue? Act as a results detective and deconstruct the methods others used. Then, fine tune them and modify them to resolve your challenges. If you hear people around you say, “Oh, you can’t do that. We tried that before and it didn’t work.” Simply agree with them, but change the emphasis: “You’re right. YOU can’t do that, but I can.” By not accepting yesterday’s solutions to dictate tomorrow’s approaches, you will free yourself to try even tried-before ideas in a unique way. Again Einstein added lucid insight into resistance from others when he said: “Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.”

Allowing others, who may lack your vision, to direct your company’s course will keep it on the path it is currently on. It will not permit you to break free from ordinary thinking. Einstein’s wisdom summarizes this caution because, “Only a free individual can make a discovery.”

A great deal can be learned from Einstein, indisputably one of the most brilliant and groundbreaking thinkers of the past century. These were just a few of his enlightening comments about innovation. There is no question that if you want to become a more imaginative problem solver, emulating fresh thinkers will undoubtedly serve as a catalyst for your own discoveries. I invite you to become more aware of trends, new technologies, and new products, as they reflect the ever-changing needs of society. The key word there is “ever-changing” because as you well know, nothing stays the same. The world thrives on innovation and your business success depends on it. Engage in creative problem solving in everything you do and soon your mental flexibility will surprise even you.

AUTHOR BIO: (see next page)

Margo is an award-winning advertising marketer, author, inventor, speaker, and professor. Her first book, *Street-Smart Advertising: How to With the Battle of the Buzz*, was selected as the Business Book of the Month for the June 2008 issue of *Delta Sky Magazine*. It is available in two 6-CD webinar sets, which just won a National Clarion Award for Educational Materials. She invented *tactikPAK*®, a patented system of learning, created *Mental Peanut Butter*® Training, and developed three advertising CDs, plus an inspirational DVD. She's writing her second advertising book, *The Brains Behind Great Ad Campaigns*, scheduled for release in 2009. Her award-winning Web site exudes creativity <http://www.UnlockTheBlock.com>.