

Creative Communication is For You

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Abstract

Would you sign a contract to add at least one new creative communications idea to your repertoire during the coming year? Why not? As communicators, we're constantly dealing with words, ideas, and thoughts, so why shouldn't we be leaders in creativity? Why shouldn't we teach by example?

Creative Communications is For You

Harold B. Swanson and Warren Gore

Would you sign a contract to add at least one new creative communications idea to your repertoire during the coming year? Why not? As communicators, we're constantly dealing with words, ideas, and thoughts, so why shouldn't we be leaders in creativity? Why shouldn't we teach by example?

Of course, you could say, "there is nothing new in the world," or "what's the use of rediscovering the wheel every year?" And you'd be right to a certain extent because much of what is new is really refurbishing and giving a new face to the old. But even that takes imagination and alertness.

More than anything, creativity requires the willingness to work hard, to try new ideas, to accept new challenges. It requires an open mind and freedom to move ahead . . . a freedom which our profession provides.

It was a challenge that put the two of us on a "creativity binge" and resulted in the ideas we're presenting in this article. The Minnesota professional development committee asked us to provide seminars on creativity in programming, teaching, and communications. We knew we didn't have the answers so we read and listened widely (and reading is one basis for getting creative ideas). We asked all participants in our seminars to list one creative idea they had used or heard during the past year. The response was nearly 100 percent and the ideas generated showed that Extension communicators and teachers were indeed creative. We feel that the ideas generated by our colleagues and our own search will apply to all of us in communications . . . extension, research, business, advertising agencies, government.

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This discussion will look at three major questions regarding creativity.
Is creativity possible for me?
What is creativity?
How can I improve my own creativity?

Is Creativity Possible for Me?

Is creativity possible for me? We think it is. In fact, we believe creativity is a **must** for good communication.

Some people may say they are too old to be creative. We can point to examples proving or disproving this. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, said that experience takes away more than it adds and that younger people are nearer to ideas than older people. Alexander the Great had conquered much of the world by age 25. Then it was all down hill as his creativity was paralyzed by his vanity. Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "If you haven't cut your name on the door of fame by 40, you might as well put away your jackknife."

On the other hand John Milton lost his sight at 44, wrote *Paradise Lost* when he was 57 and *Paradise Regained* at 62. Harvey Lehman studied notables who in their day thought up creative ideas of importance to the world. He discovered that for the 1000 or more creative achievers he checked the median age was 75.

In spite of what he said, Oliver Wendell Holmes at 48 was an unknown professor and physician. At 50 he wrote *Autocrat at the Breakfast Table* and at 75 a biography of Emerson. His son, the Supreme court justice, wrote his first great book at 75. Mark Twain at 71 turned out two books.

So let's not allow age to be an excuse for not being creative.

Intelligence or IQ isn't necessarily an indication of creativity either. Alex Osborne in *Applied Imagination* says that there is little connection between intelligence and creativity.

Neither is sex a factor in creativity. Again Osborne reports that studies have indicated that women are more creative in total numbers but men have a better record in noteworthy achievements.

Yes, you can be more creative. H. A. Overstreet in *Mature Mind* says that creativity can be retained or regained.

The major factor, many people believe, in creativity is mental energy and action. And the things that cramp creativity include a too judicial mind (the creative mind begins with an idea), too well-established concepts or habits, self-discouragement, timidity, lack of encouragement from intimates, colleagues or bosses, and the lack of contact and reading.

What is Creativity

Just what is creativity? Like communications it is hard to define and means many things to many people. Warren Gore (one of the authors) has said that “creativity is inventiveness in all of its forms.” The *American Heritage Dictionary* says creativity is “characterized by originality and expressiveness—imaginative.”

There are many ways we approach the idea of creativity and adapt it to our needs. These approaches include creativity as:

A method, a way of handling phenomena. Each of us handles efforts differently as we seek to make our tasks easier, to save time, to improve our effectiveness. Take a look at the way you have been doing things. Then spend a few minutes thinking of new ways. Brainstorm. Perhaps suddenly the light will come and a new method or idea for thinking will dawn and you'll say, “I have never tried that. Let's use that idea.” Some of us have to jot down, in our own private brainstorming sessions, a whole list of ideas, let them simmer, and later assemble them into a meaningful whole.

A process, the flow from item to item, area to area, idea to idea and subject to subject. There is a difference between creativity and activity. How can you induce yourself to turn on your creativity faucet? How do you move from one idea to another? Some people have to devote their early morning hours to this activity; others find the late evening a good time to be creative. Some have to sit in a favorite chair. Others have to walk or listen to a certain type of music or talk to colleagues.

Albert Einstein would use another process. He would bury himself in work extensively and exhaustively in the field, then put his work on the shelf, and let the subconscious wash it up.

Each of us has a different process we need to discover.

Response or responsiveness. Creativity takes mental and even physical energy. Gifted people are often those with plentiful energy and seek to learn and seek to be taught.

But it is not enough to have energy. Creative people must also have the willingness to respond. Sometimes this means a change in attitude, abandoning isolation in our thinking.

Outlook. Are you known as a pessimist or an optimist? One can be the optimistic—yet realistic—responder to stimuli in ideas or one can be the pessimist and grumper. The optimist will say the glass is half full, the pessimist, half empty. Positive responsiveness to ideas is one mark of creativity.

Concentration. Creativity calls for concentration in the area of concern. This means planning and organization, determination not to put off, stick-to-itiveness, plus, of course, innovativeness. The heart of brainstorming is concentration on creating ideas without interposing judgment.

Awareness, the ability to walk in another's moccasins or shoes. The ability to empathize and the ability to be sensitive to others is still another aspect of creativity. Take time to be aware.

Insight, the sudden understanding or flash that comes from being steeped in a subject and finally getting the picture . . . the AHA! or EUREKA! I've got it! Here the subconscious may be soaking up our understanding and our knowledge. Then, with the loaded terminal, suddenly the solution comes vividly to us as it did to Einstein.

In research, there is another phenomena closely related to this called serendipity, the faculty for making fortunate and unexpected discoveries by accident.

Perception, or level of response through our senses—hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting, smelling. Too often we fail to use these senses to the point where they give us a creative output.

The well-known biologist, Louis Aggasiz of Harvard University, once assigned a precocious but self-satisfied student to stare at a dead pickled fish lying in a tray. A bit miffed the student looked for an hour and then returned to his teacher with his conclusion. Aggasiz said, "fine," and then sent the disgruntled student back to staring at the fish for the rest of the day. Later the student admitted that, through this exercise, he had found much or perceived much that he hadn't seen before.

The famous speaker Russell Conwell in his "Acres of Diamond" speech, which he gave 6100 times, illustrates again the need for perceiving that which is about us. The man of the story wandered all over the world seeking his fortune. After his death his relatives were looking in his own back yard and saw there unusual sand-covered items which they cleaned up. In the process they discovered a tremendous supply of diamonds, which was to become one of the largest diamond mines in the world. The wanderer had failed to see what was close to him because he had not looked and concentrated hard enough.

Productivity, the outpouring of ideas. We all are different in this respect, but often quantity and constant outpouring will result in creative ideas which you can polish into more of the quality product later.

How Can You Improve Your Own Creativity?

How can you improve your creativity? As professional communicators, ours is a field that lives by creativity and ideas. Here are a few ideas for increasing your creativity.

1. Associate with those who are curious and creative. Certainly you are not going to give up old established friends who make you comfortable. At the same time seek the “change of pace” that others will give your thinking. Add a bit of vigor to your creative ideas and efforts by cross pollination with others.

2. Discipline yourself to try out new ideas or new tasks. Accept a challenging speaking or writing assignment or a different aspect of communications. Or create the opportunity yourself by volunteering. This will threaten the security you’ve gained by doing the nice comfortable repetitive job every day. The opportunity is there. For those with “Plans of Work” or working with MBO (management by objectives), write your ideas into your plans or objectives, so that discipline is there. Don’t be afraid of failure. The discipline of stated goals will make for greater success.

3. Look for ideas in your reading and read, read, and read with a purpose. The other day we picked up a copy of *Readers Digest* and started marking ideas that could apply to communications. Soon the list ran into the dozens because we were looking for ideas and relating them to our work. In preparing for seminars on new ideas in programming reading the *Extension Service Review* was a stimulating and helpful exercise with ideas pouring out. When we read the *Review* before, without purpose, we skimmed and got little from it.

4. Establish your own deadlines, priorities, or rewards for making or taking a creative idea.

5. Take time to dream constructively. James Harvey Robinson has said that we spend half of our time in reverie, a fourth in decision making, a fourth in rationalization, and 1 percent in abstract thought. It’s the latter 1 percent that can be creative.

6. Listen for ideas on radio and TV, from friends, and by those numerous professional contacts our jobs provide us. The Johnny Carson Show, for example, will give you many ideas on presentations and communications.

7. Take time to ask questions. The old journalistic 5 W’s and H, who, what, when, where, why, and how give us a head start in creativity just by outlining the questions to ask.

8. Develop an idea file and write down ideas you can use in the future. File them so they are constantly coming to your attention. Make that file active.

9. Keep an open mind to new and different ways of doing things and new things to do. The brainstorming technique emphasizes the listing of ideas without evaluation. Creativity must first allow that free flow of ideas without judgment. Alternatives can be judged later.

10. Look at yourself and your attitudes: are you protective and afraid of ideas? Or are you willing to try? Do you say, "I'll try," instead of, "it won't work," or, "I just can't find the time," or "I've got those deadlines to meet?"

11. Ask yourself, "Can I use that idea by adapting it, by giving it a new twist, by adding to it, by subtracting from it, by reversing it, by combining it with something else?"

All of these are positive steps to more creative communications. But there are negative aspects, too. Creativeness can be killed by habits we all have.

The list of habits that kill ideas include such words or habits as: quick judgment, fear of failure, passive preading, spectatorship, excessive modesty, false dignity, perfectionism, day dreaming, worry, self discouragement, fear of losing love or acceptance, tradition, fear of making mistakes, bureaucratic procedures, and many more. These often are understandable habits, but breaking a few will help you be more creative.

Try These Creative, But Not Necessarily New, Ideas

Through our work with Extension faculty in Minnesota, by reading, and by exposing ourselves to a wide variety of professionals we found that we could come up with literally hundreds of creative—but not necessarily new—ideas. Here are a few examples that may trigger your efforts to be more creative in your communications or teaching job.

* *Live projection*—One specialist projects shadows of live animals (rodents, insects) on a screen while describing the animals.

* *Imagination stretchers*—Using a simple gimmick often will loosen up the audience and make it think. This can be a paper and pencil exercise, the well known nine dots experiment is one of these. Try drawing four straight lines that will go through all nine dots without lifting your pencil from the page. Hard? Yes, until you realize that you can go beyond the bounds to solve the problem. (See inside back cover.)

* *Competition*—Using tests or judging or games may help create interest and communication. Several years ago an Extension dairyman and a dairy magazine showed the picture of four milk cows and asked the public to judge which was the most productive. Newspapers and other magazines carried these pictures extensively and got wide participation. This exercise proved you can't judge cows by their appearance, only by their records.

* *Preinvolvement*—Ask people for their ideas, suggestions, or questions before or at your communications workshops. These then become the center of discussion and trigger other ideas.

* *The Three Little Pigs*—We have all heard about the use of contrast as a method of teaching. Many years ago an animal scientist fed three pigs from the same litter rations from different years such as 1910, 1950, 1960. Then he dramatically showed, by contrast, the difference in growth. This then became the communications theme for selling the benefits of research at land grant colleges.

* *Tape a message*—Using a simple phone attachment and a small cassette recorder you can record short messages from experts in the field for use at meetings, classes, or staff conferences.

* *Give it a Face Lifting*—Often presentations or communications can be improved by using the same old material but giving it a new approach. A new less controversial name, for example, may help. The anti-abortionists, for example, became pro-lifers.

* *The Passing Parade*—Using contrast or comparison to tell what the situation is today and what it was yesterday is effective. Thus we can tell how many people in our population were born before world war one, world war two, Korean war, the assassination of Kennedy, Watergate. The figures are surprising and emphasize the different nature of our population.

* *Ask the Man Who'll See It*—Several ad agencies pretest their ads with farmers before they send them out to see which will get the best reception.

* *Adopt a Versatile Character*—For certain visual presentations such a device will create and sustain interest.

* *Quickies*—The National Agricultural Marketing Association at its annual meetings frequently uses this idea. Members ask various companies to give a short five-minute visualized presentation of a sales or ad program to begin each session. It gets people to their seats.

* *Themes Make Messages Sing*—This is widely used in industry at sales meetings and other events. Many agencies try to get a single theme for each of their campaigns or efforts. This takes a little extra imagination, but it does give a central thought running through the entire event or communication.

* *Learning Contracts*—These are becoming popular in college circles, in 4-H work, and in other areas. The learner himself decides what he or she will do, puts it down on paper, and then delivers at the proper time. This is what we suggested at the very beginning of this article.

* *Pied Piper of Blank County*—Many county agents have taken an audience along with them on their tours. Working with the local radio stations, they have prepared messages in advance and may even have some live broadcasts from the various points on the tour.

**Quizzes*—Many years ago we tried having a quiz at the end of every Extension bulletin, emphasizing the high points. Later this was used as a regular news feature in many newspapers. We still see many of these self-administered tests. If they are simple, they will make good teaching or stimulation devices at meetings, seminars, and even classes.

* *Outline Your Slide Set*—Usually it's not wise to give the listener or viewer something to distract him or her from your message. However, if you'll identify each slide, give a brief description and leave a space for the viewer to take notes you may trigger new ideas on the part of the viewer and still retain his or her attention.

* *50 Ideas-50 Minutes*—A direct mail seminar called upon a panel of experts to produce an idea a minute. A bell was rung every so many ideas, keeping the panel alive and bringing forth different ways of handling direct mail efforts. We did the same thing in our creativity seminars.

* *Use Actual Objects*—Real experience and real objects are the basis for some of our most effective teaching. A forester may show a variety of objects made from wood, a home economist the actual ingredients. Nothing new but often effective.

* *Morphological Synthesis*—That fancy title ought to get you! This, for example, could involve sorting learning outcomes, concepts, and teaching methods and placing them in relationship with each other. A candy store, trying to increase its trade, used this technique to get ideas. It asked employees to list 10 ideas in each of three columns on (1) occasion or appeal, (2) type of prospects, and (3) medium for information. The result was a possible combination of 1000 or more ideas.

We could go on into the hundreds with other ideas we gained in our work in a relatively short time. We'll tease you with a few titles and let you fill in your ideas. Here they are: Names Make News, Games People Play, The Statistics Game, Lunch and Learn, Master Gardeners, Consumer Bowl, Semantic Differential, Position Your Product, Surprise Box, Mystery Meeting, Scenarios for the Future.

These weren't our ideas. They were our colleagues' who discovered they could be creative. AAACE members are professionals in communications, a profession that lives by creativity. Why not try a new idea and continue on the creativity bandwagon?