

Young, James Webb – A Technique for Producing Ideas

McGraw-Hill, 2003, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★

In his last year as an advertising agency executive, James Webb Young was taking an apparently urgent meeting with a client at a well-known magazine. It turned out that the magazine had decided that their future strategy should be to “sell ideas”. However, after that they got stuck and now they turned to Webb with the question: “*You have produced a lot of advertising ideas. Just how do you get them? The boys are waiting for me to come back to tell them.*” Totally unprepared for the topic at hand and with no formula to share Webb had to disappoint the client, but even though he at the time thought the question funny and naïve it stuck and over time Webb realized that there actually is a technique for producing ideas. The resulting formula was later on presented for graduate students in advertising at the University of Chicago and for advertising practitioners. The presentations subsequently became this book published in 1965.

According to Webb there are two principles that are the source of ideas and then a method by which ideas are produced. The first principle is that an idea is a new combination of old elements. The second is that a person’s capacity to create these new combinations of old elements depends on his ability to see relationships – making the habit of mind to search for relationships between facts an important and trainable aspect in the production of new ideas.

Further, the technique to generate ideas follows five distinct steps in a definite order. 1) The first step is to gather the information that makes up the raw material for the idea. The material is of two kinds, the specific and the general. The specific material concerns the particular facts on the topic at hand. In advertising it could be facts on the product, the target customers etc. The general material is the vast databank of information on the world that is needed to come up with the elements that combined produce a new idea. To be able to generate creative ideas a person needs to be curious of the world and constantly browse and make the cumbersome effort to add interesting

concepts of life and events to his databank. The more facts of seemingly little practical use that are stored the more new combinations are possible and the easier to generate ideas. A person should always try to enrich his store of general knowledge.

2) The next step is to chew the material, analyze it, break it down into pieces, look at it from different angles and try to understand the problem you are going to solve. In this stage you are seeking a synthesis to make up that new combination that will be your idea. It’s important to be open-minded and take notes of all the partial thoughts and ideas that come up. 3) The next stage is counter-intuitively to drop the issue and turn the problem over to your unconscious. A tired mind under stress will not be as creative as one that is relaxed and stimulated. Hence, listen to music, take a walk with your wife, go to the movies and let the mind digest the issue you are trying to solve.

4) Hopefully, but not inevitably as people differ in creative ability, in the fourth step an idea will appear as from nowhere perhaps when in the shower, when you are half awake in the morning etc. Be sure to write it down immediately. 5) In the last stage the idea has to be tested with other persons. Submit it to criticism and let others improve on it and add qualities that might have been overlooked. This will develop the idea to be of practical use.

This is the whole method and according to the reactions Webb has received from readers over the years it works. Now, Webb’s book is very short and as such adds almost no additional depth to the method beyond what’s been included in this review. On the one hand the book delivers on its aim in a believable and persuasive way. It also interestingly ties in to Charlie Munger’s concept of storing a number of “mental models” of the world. On the other hand its contents could easily be summarized on one power-point slide without missing much level of detail.

Save your money and simply print this review.

Mats, Larsson, January 25, 2015