

COLORADO BUSINESS REVIEW

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Leeds School Creativity Challenge on this page. Inspired Thinking on page 3. Structured Creativity on page 4.



Creativity Challenge submissions by Leeds School MBA Program applicants include product prototypes, photography, music and video recordings, books, and more.

Leeds School of Business MBA Program Initiates Creativity Challenge

Katie Kingston

“The ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.; originality, progressiveness, or imagination.”

Does this sound like a fair description of the qualities of a successful entrepreneur or an MBA student? It is, in fact, a standard dictionary definition of “creativity.” This past admissions cycle, the MBA Program at the Leeds School of Business upended its traditional multiple essay requirement for admission, and inserted a “creativity challenge” as an option for those aspiring to become students in the program. The approach pleasantly shook-up the admissions office, and opened the process to a fresh view

of a vital component of a successful student: creativity, originality, and the ability to think outside the box.

Origin of the Concept

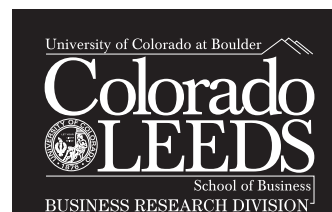
In 2006, members of the Admissions Committee attended a one-day “MBA Summit” run by Dean Dennis Ahlburg, where participants brainstormed in an effort to distinguish the Leeds MBA Program from the myriad other MBA programs available—and advertised—to applicants. What might make this program’s “personality” stand out? The Leeds program is located in one of the most entrepreneurial regions of the country. Time and again, inquiries fielded in the MBA office contained an entrepreneurial component, emphasizing the importance the upcoming graduate school generation

places on fresh approaches to problems encountered in the business world. The creativity challenge was the answer.

Guidelines

There were rules, of course. The Admissions staff was leery of receiving projects too massive—or smelly or alive—to store in their offices.

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Think Broadly.
Act Boldly.



CREATIVITY CHALLENGE, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

From the Editor

In this issue of the *CBR* we examine the role of creativity in the business world. The article on the front page by Katie Kingston discusses the “creativity challenge” component of the Leeds School MBA Program that was recently launched. On page 3, Rick Sterling of the Sterling-Rice Group discusses the power of “inspired ideas” to move brands and people. Leeds School Professor Page Moreau examines creativity from a marketing research standpoint in her article on page 4. How does creativity affect consumers—the problems they face, and the decisions they make?

Colorado Business Economic Outlook Forum

It's not too early to mark your calendar to attend the 43rd annual Colorado Business Economic Outlook Forum. This half-day event will be held Monday, December 10, at the Grand Hyatt Hotel, 1750 Welton, in downtown Denver. A networking reception will follow the forecast and discussion breakout sessions.

As always, please contact me at 303-492-1147 with any questions or comments.

—Richard Wobbekind

Projects could not exceed 50 pounds (a bag of Quikrete and the attached explanatory essay were the closest an applicant came to tipping the scales), nor could they exceed a size of 2 cubic feet. Even within these parameters, there was no stopping the creative juices of the approximately 225 applicants to the full-time program—75% of applicants overall—who submitted a creativity challenge. The office became the repository for an astonishing display of originality.

Suffice it to say, it is difficult to choose or describe a favorite in a few paragraphs. The chocolate ganache truffle cake submitted by one student did, it must be admitted, “take the cake.” Admissions staff watched open-mouthed as the beautiful confection was borne into the office by its creator, and spirits rose even higher as it dawned on those present that this was not a project to be preserved for the ages. It was only going to be evaluated by passing the taste-bud test, and it didn't take long for said test to occur. The sky-blue eyes of a beautiful child, photographed by an applicant while on her travels in a foreign country, gazed at us from a shelf in our office for the entire admissions season. A four-foot-long scroll painted in China in response to a request from an aspiring businessman was displayed prominently on one of our walls, encouraging us in Chinese characters to practice “Pride, Courage, and Passion.” A laptop with an ice pick embedded in it sat, inscrutable, on a bookshelf, perhaps conveying different things to different observers, but leaving no doubt as to the creative impulse of the mind behind it. Essays, beautifully bound books of photographs and text, hilarious stories, and impressive shows of artistic talent manifested themselves in the projects submitted. A very multidimensional glimpse of each of these applicants was afforded us, whereas previously, we had at best seen one or two aspects—anything they could convey with words and statistics.


Leeds is not alone in this trend toward expanding its application process to include a creative component. This fall, the University of Chicago will require applicants to submit up to four PowerPoint or similar slides with pictures, graphics, or text, along with the two standard essay questions. NYU's Stern School of Business has had an application question for years that gives applicants an opportunity to talk about their life experience outside the conventional essay structure.

One of the nicest things to come out of this process has been the positive statements of the applicants themselves. It was almost as if the mere existence of such a creativity challenge—with the attendant tacit request for a more personal view of

the applicant—inspired a bit of personal examination and achievement that evidently had a therapeutic and stimulating effect on the applicant beyond its actual value to their admissions process. These applicants' quotes that originally appeared in *BusinessWeek* earlier this year illustrate the general reaction.

- “I was glad to see that they stayed away from the standard questions, like ‘What do you want to do when you grow up and why are you a good fit for the program.’ Those are all typical and you feel like you have to have a right answer.”
- “It sort of affirmed my belief that I was applying to a school that has the same values that I do.”
- “I was pleasantly surprised at how creative I could be!”
- “The creativity challenge allowed me to present the Leeds School of Business with my skill set in a way that couldn't be described purely on paper.”
- “Leeds' unique application question gave me the opportunity to introduce myself on a more personal level.”
- “I enjoyed this aspect of the application, and appreciated the opportunity to show a side of myself that went overlooked by other schools.”
- “At first, I was very happy to see that the creativity challenge was considered ‘extra credit’ by the admissions committee. My initial reaction was ‘I don't have a creative bone in my body.’ But I began to get very serious about it quickly when I realized it could be the difference necessary to get in.”

Anne Sandoe, Director of MBA Programs summarizes, “I love the personal insight the applicants allow us into their lives—it makes the process much more personal. And since one of the traits of our program is creativity, this allows us to see who's got the potential we are looking for.”

Admissions staffers are standing by! Let's see what you've got. 

Katie Kingston works in the Leeds School of Business MBA Admissions Office. Visit leeds.colorado.edu/LeedsEDP2007 for more information about Leeds MBA and executive development programs.

Inspired Thinking

Rick Sterling

What moves an organization? What motivates a company to move with energy and common purpose? Why do customers in large numbers commit to what you have to offer? After 14 years as an operating manager and 23 years as a management consultant, I've developed a pretty clear view on how businesses are transformed and propelled ahead.

At Sterling-Rice Group our practice is built on the idea of "inspired thinking that moves people." Brands and businesses are built by moving the minds, hearts, and ultimately, the actions of individuals—both those who work for the selling organization and those who buy from it. And only an inspired idea has the power to move both constituent groups.

An inspired idea embodies a sense of vision, strategy, creativity, and culture that an organization coalesces around for common purpose and passion. An inspired idea, grounded in original insight and proprietary brand equities, also creates an emotionally distinct customer proposition.

Frontier Airlines

Our work for Frontier Airlines is a good example of the power of an inspired idea. In 2000, the Denver-based airline was a weak number two player, operating in the shadow of United Airlines. Frontier had no compelling consumer proposition, no basis for consumer preference, and no common vision for the organization to rally around.

After a deep internal immersion, including rounds of employee and management interviews, and a comprehensive consumer segmentation study that clarified target segments, under-delivered needs, and advantaged Frontier brand equities . . . an idea began to form.

Frontier could win by simply doing a number of small things that make a big difference. They could provide a better flying experience by offering affordability, friendliness, helpfulness, and creature comforts. So they built their new Airbus fleet with Direct TV at each seat and more leg room. They started offering free trips with fewer frequent flyer miles, and fewer blackout dates and change restrictions. They scheduled only direct flights, and created a new, updated identity for employees and customers alike.

The inspired idea that captured all of this was triggered by overhearing families eagerly asking what animal was on the tail of the plane they were about to board. "A Whole Different Animal" was born. That thought became the basis of a magnificent advertising campaign by Grey Advertising that clearly changed the hearts and minds of the flying public.

But more importantly, the idea of "A Whole Different Animal" became the strategic vision for the company. Every position in the company was redefined to deliver a different and better flying experience.

This inspired idea drives both the common purpose of the airline's operations and communications to the consumer. It's a creative, strategic, and values-based platform for growth.

INSPIRED IDEAS CAN MOVE PEOPLE, BOTH THOSE IN THE WORKFORCE WHO MUST ENERGETICALLY EXECUTE THE STRATEGY, AND CUSTOMERS WHO MUST MAKE A PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO BUY.

Indeed, market share has nearly tripled and Frontier Airlines is now the preferred airline of the Front Range market.

Almond Board of California

When the Almond Board of California came to us, almonds received low ratings on all important criteria—health, sensory characteristics, and consumer preference. Prices were declining, and the industry had no strategic direction. After extensive research was conducted into how the industry operates and the product's inherent equities, and a thorough competitive analysis was performed, a question began to develop. How do we make almonds relevant, contemporary, and preferred?

While almonds are a popular snack, they're primarily used as an ingredient in other foods. We discovered that when almonds are part of the whole, the end dish is much better. The big idea was expressed as "Almonds Are In." When almonds are "in," the end product has enhanced sensory characteristics and the end dish is more heart healthy—surprising news to consumers.

"Almonds Are In" became the platform for an aggressive communication plan directed to

both consumers and food processors. Jumping ahead several years, almonds are now viewed as a contemporary high sensory, high nutrition snack and ingredient. In a commodity industry where supply typically influences prices, prices paid to growers have doubled even as supply has doubled. The almond industry is now considered the model of success for every commodity group in America. "Almonds Are In" embodies a creative and strategically fused idea that is the long-term foundation for industry success. That's the power of an inspired idea.

Kraft

While I'm in the food world, another great example of an inspired idea is the work we did for Kraft. Kraft had developed a new frozen dough technology that could be applied to their Tombstone pizza business. Unlike pre-baked frozen pizza, this new technology allowed the dough to remain uncooked until it was baked by the consumer. The yeast would activate and the dough would rise in your home oven, just as it would in a pizzeria.

However, there were two apparent problems. The technology was expensive ("how to sell a \$5 pizza in a \$2 world?"), and enormous cynicism existed about frozen pizza ("we're tired of claims to be the best frozen pizza when there's no real difference"). After in-depth segmentation work revealed the different occasions and need states in which pizza was consumed, the inspired idea was to shift the frame of reference from frozen pizza to take-out and delivered pizza. Similarly, the idea expressed how the fresh-baked experience at home was superior even to these other pizza options ("dough rises before your eyes and bakes fresh and hot at home"). This triggered shockingly positive consumer reactions ("this is like a \$12 pizza for \$5"). The entire value proposition was flipped on its head.

Because the Tombstone name stood only for frozen pizza, we renamed the product DiGiorno. The inspired idea was expressed as "It's Not Delivery, It's DiGiorno." The outcome has been outstanding, with brand sales exceeding \$600 million per year. It's one of Kraft's largest successes in the past 25 years. And the brand is now

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Structured Creativity: No Paradox

Page Moreau

Since paint-by-number kits surged in popularity in the 1950s, consumers have sought out products designed to assist them in being creative. “Self-expression for the time deprived,” as a recent article in *Forbes* deemed the phenomenon, has created demand for products offered by firms ranging from specialty crafts (e.g., Martha Stewart) to home improvement (e.g., Lowes). Between 2000 and 2002, Americans spent approximately \$29 billion on hobbies and crafts alone, making this sector one of the fastest-growing areas of the economy (Craft and Hobby Association, annual report 2003). Among the many products offering constrained creative experiences are kits (e.g., model trains, needlepoint, paint-by-number), how-to guides (e.g., cookbooks, home repair, landscaping), and inspirational sources (e.g., home improvement programs, cooking shows, paint-your-own pottery stores).

While thinking creatively is an integral part in the daily life of every consumer, surprisingly little marketing research has examined the factors influencing such processes. In two recent papers, Darren Dahl, a professor of marketing at the University of British Columbia, and I have begun to address that gap. The first paper examined the effects of constraints on the way consumers think during a creative problem-solving situation (“Designing the Solution: The Impact of Constraints on Consumers’ Creativity,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, volume 32, June 2005). When faced with a common problem (e.g., the need to put dinner on the table in an hour), most consumers will follow a path of least resistance; that is, they will retrieve a known solution (take-out from the Taj) and implement a plan to solve it (find the menu and place an order). Consumers who follow a path of least resistance are generally not likely to generate creative outcomes.

Our research was designed to understand whether constraints would force consumers off their paths of least resistance. Participants in our studies were asked to design toys for children. We gave each person 5 different shapes to use in designing their toys, but we manipulated two constraints concerning the selection and use of those shapes: (1) half of the participants were allowed to choose 5 shapes from among 20 possible shapes while the others had 5 randomly assigned to them; (2) half of the participants were forced to use all 5 of their shapes when making their toy while the



others could use as many as they wanted. After they had designed their toys, the participants described in writing the thought processes they had used to create them. A team of expert judges rated the toys for creativity. A different team of judges rated participants’ thought processes when creating the toys. Interestingly, only the people who faced both constraints (they could not choose their shapes, and they were forced to use all 5 of them)

tended to leave the path of least resistance to design genuinely creative toys. A follow-up study showed that undertaking this more creative route required more time and effort; when time was too constrained, the constraints did not yield more creative toys. Taken together, these studies show that creative thought is cognitively effortful and that people tend to avoid it when easier alternatives are available.

Our second paper focused on the influence of constraints on consumers’ actual experiences during creative tasks (“Thinking Inside the Box: Why Consumers Enjoy Constrained Creative Experiences,” *Journal of Marketing Research*, volume 44, 3, August 2007). The vast majority of the products sold to consumers help them “be creative” either by constraining the creative *process* (e.g., by giving them a set of instructions) and/or the creative *outcome* (e.g., by showing them a picture of what the end product should look like). Booming sales growth in these categories suggests that consumers value these types of constraints, and a central objective of this research was to understand why.

To address this question, we first conducted a number of in-depth interviews with men and women across a wide range of hobby areas (scrapbooking, modeling, cooking, jewelry-making, card-making, sewing, carpentry, and quilting) to understand the general motivations underlying their creative pursuits. Key to these interviews was also understanding how the products available (e.g., kits, tools, instructional materials, classes, books, patterns, etc.) and the constraints they represented influenced the creative experiences. The interviews revealed a tension between consumers’ desire for competence (often provided by the products on the market) and their need for autonomy to express their individual creativity.

CONSUMERS WHO FOLLOW A PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE ARE GENERALLY NOT LIKELY TO GENERATE CREATIVE OUTCOMES. OUR RESEARCH WAS DESIGNED TO UNDERSTAND WHETHER CONSTRAINTS WOULD FORCE CONSUMERS OFF THEIR PATHS OF LEAST RESISTANCE.

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INSPIRED THINKING, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

a lead case study on positioning in the foremost business school text (*Marketing Management*, 2006, by Kotler and Keller).

Waterpik


We've also seen the transformative power of inspired ideas in our work for Waterpik. There, we found an idea that worked across their diverse product portfolio (shower heads, oral irrigators, and water purifiers) and shifted the frame of reference from replacement appliances to personal care items. The idea was captured as "Treat Yourself Better," reflecting the common rejuvenating quality of each product. The packaging and identity was updated, rejuvenated products were developed, and "Treat Yourself Better" has become an operating and communication platform internally and externally. A recently declining brand, it is now growing 20% per year.

We've come to recognize that only inspired ideas can move people, both those in the workforce who must energetically execute the strategy, and customers who must make a personal commitment to buy. In moving individuals, inspired ideas move brands and organizations. Business leaders, in developing their own transformative strategies, should pursue nothing less. 

Rick Sterling is CEO of the Sterling-Rice Group, an integrated strategy and communication firm located in Boulder. They work domestically and globally for leading and emerging companies in consumer products, financial services, technology, travel, recreation, and other segments. He can be contacted at 303-381-6400.

STRUCTURED CREATIVITY, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

We followed up the interviews with an experiment in which we manipulated the number of constraints imposed on participants during a creative task. Study participants came into our lab, which had been outfitted with convection ovens, and were asked to make, bake, and decorate a cookie. They were given the materials they needed (dough, rolling pins, cookie cutters, decorations). To understand how constraints influence the creative experience, we gave step-by-step instructions to half of the participants. Furthermore, we gave half of the participants a picture of a specific, decorated cookie and asked them to replicate it. The participants made their cookies and then completed our surveys. The results of this study revealed that participants receiving a set of instructions without having to make our specific cookie felt like they had enough guidance during the process to feel competent but enough freedom with the outcome to feel autonomous. This combination resulted in higher levels of task enjoyment. Interestingly, those forced to make the specific cookie but given no instructions reported the next highest level of enjoyment. These participants found autonomy in the process rather than in the determination of the outcome. Consistent with the ideas identified in the qualitative study, consumers

need a balance of competence and autonomy in their creative experiences, and it appears that marketers who can define the correct balance of product constraints are in a strong position. 

Page Moreau is an associate professor of marketing in the Leeds School of Business at CU-Boulder. She may be contacted at Page.Moreau@Colorado.EDU.

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