

Best Practices

5-TIPS

How to Grow Great Ideas



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We all know the value of offering fresh and innovative programs to members. New offerings can attract and retain more members, and even inspire them to become volunteers. Cutting-edge services can

boost your association's budget, enhance its reputation, and deepen its political and community influence. However, building innovation into our organizations doesn't happen overnight. Often, the hardest part is just getting started.

From my work facilitating innovation workshops, I've learned several ways in which any association can set the stage for developing truly original ideas.



1. Set aside the time to get creative.

Often the biggest creativity boost comes from simply allocating the time to look for new ideas. Although it can feel frivolous to set aside time for something that is not tangible in terms of immediate output, creative solutions can emerge only when the clutter of everyday association and member management is set aside. Make a weekly or monthly creativity meeting a routine part of doing business at your organization, not a marginal activity.

2. Bring together diverse participants.

Fresh ideas can come from anyone. When you sit down to develop new ideas, invite a variety of members and staff from every level. You can even launch your own virtual "creativity circle" by inviting AEs from associations across the country to join a monthly conference call or Web conference. In addition to looking outside your state, gather people from outside your organization—from either other REALTOR® associations or other businesses. The key is to find participants who share a common problem—like declining membership—and offer creative brainstorming as a mutually beneficial way to develop solutions. Everyone feeds off of the new perspectives that diverse participants bring.

3. Use a facilitator to keep the creativity flowing.

Once your participants are ready to get creative, designate or hire a facilitator to guide the conversation and push participants to dig deep. The facilitator

doesn't participate in the creative process. His or her role is not only to encourage the kind of divergent thinking that often leads to original ideas, but also to cultivate a safe space in which fragile ideas can develop.

4. Give yourself license to think crazy thoughts.

Kick off your creativity meeting by asking participants to present the craziest ideas they can think of to solve the issue at hand. Tell participants to forget everything they know about the association's existing rules and traditions and consider how limitless funds or staff might solve the problem. Go a step further and ask them to contemplate how Superman or Steve Jobs might solve the problem. Sure, it's off-the-wall thinking, but you never know what nuggets of innovation can be refined into feasible strategies.

5. Look for creative ideas from anywhere.

Step outside your comfort zone when you're trying to come up with innovative ideas for a class, fresh content for your newsletter, or new ways to communicate with your members. Seek input from members you don't know, or spend some time in front of the magazine rack at your local bookstore browsing publications you wouldn't normally read. The point is to break out of the routine.

Innovation isn't easy and it won't happen overnight, but establishing a process to jump-start innovation can lead to changes that your members will see right away. ■