Brainwriting
Getting More from Your Idea Sessions

Many of us have taken part in brainstorming sessions. These are commonly used to generate ideas, and to come up with a creative solution to a problem. What can often happen during a brainstorming session, however, is that key players on the team speak up and express their ideas. Everyone else then enters the discussion about those few ideas, and they reach a consensus on the solution – without considering many other ideas that could have been generated.

Brainwriting allows everyone to participate.
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This can be one of the drawbacks of the brainstorming process. Some members of the group may not speak up because they're shy, or are afraid that their suggestions may be rejected. Others may say nothing at all because they fear their ideas are simply too outrageous or bold. People with stronger personality types may loudly push and defend their ideas, without listening to others' suggestions. And 'conservative' people may tend to propose only safe alternatives.

Yes, brainstorming can be effective in getting people to think laterally about a problem. However, if you're faced with obstacles like those we have just mentioned, how do you overcome them?

Enter the brainwriting technique – an idea-generating process that enables EVERYONE in the group to participate in a nonthreatening way. This approach can often generate more potential solutions than traditional brainstorming.

Why? One reason is because traditional brainstorming sessions allow only one person to speak at a time. By the time each individual has spoken (and the group has finished the discussion), most participants have edited, discarded, or simply forgotten their own ideas. This is called 'blocking,' and it can reduce creativity and productivity in these sessions. Brainwriting can help to eliminate this problem.

In this article, we'll show you what brainwriting is – and look at how you can start using it with your team.

What Is Brainwriting?

Brainwriting is similar to brainstorming – they're both methods for generating ideas and solutions for a problem.

Brainwriting, however, gives everyone equal opportunity to participate, and it enables all group members to think without any 'blocking.'

Here are the steps of a brainwriting session:

1. Seat group members at a table, with a sheet of paper in front of each person. At the top of the page, ask them to write down the problem that everyone is trying to solve. (Note: They should NOT write their names.) Appoint someone to be moderator, and time each round.

2. Give the group three minutes to write down three ideas for how to solve the problem. They should not edit the ideas, or try to perfect them. Allow them to write in 'free form.' Do not permit any discussion.

3. After three minutes, move on to round two. Ask everyone to pass their papers to the left, and then generate three more ideas on the new paper they have just received. They can build on the first three ideas that are already written, or think of three new solutions.

4. Ask the moderator to decide how many times the papers are passed around the table.

5. When all rounds are finished, collect the papers, and write all ideas on a whiteboard for everyone to see. Then begin discussing which ideas would work best for solving the current problem.

Benefits of Brainwriting

There are several advantages of using brainwriting in a group:

- Because there's no discussion during the initial idea-generating rounds, you can produce many ideas in a very short amount of time.

- All group members – even the quiet and shy people – have an equal chance of offering their ideas for consideration.

- Everything is anonymous – you don't know who wrote which ideas – so there's more freedom to be truly creative. Participants are often empowered to suggest solutions that they otherwise might have thought were too unusual, or would not be well received.

- Exchanging papers still allows group members to evaluate and build on other people's ideas, but in a much more concentrated, creative way.

When to Use Brainwriting

Brainwriting can be used to help solve almost any problem. The process is used often in marketing, design, and creative fields, but it's also gaining popularity in other areas.

Any time that you would traditionally use brainstorming to solve a problem, you could use brainwriting instead.

Key Points

Although brainstorming is the most common technique for generating ideas in a group, brainwriting can be much more effective, because it involves all participants on an equal basis. Both introverts and extroverts can participate, and you can produce more ideas in less time.