7 Ways to Best Brainstorm as a Group

Group brainstorming can be productive—with a little structure. Here are some of the best ways:

1. Create Diverse Teams

Rather than holding a brainstorming session with your team or department, create a cross-functional group of people from all different parts of your company to benefit from diverse viewpoints and skills.

Research suggests adding new team members with current ones will improve the quality of ideas. Northwestern sociologist Brian Uzzi studied 474 Broadway musicals and found those with "intermediate" levels of social intimacy were three times more likely to do well with both critics and the audience—as opposed to those with "high" levels of cohesion, aka teams who always work together.

Fresh voices lets you avoid groupthink—but if a group is too unfamiliar, people often clash. Having a range of relationships gives you the best of both worlds.

2. Try Brainwriting

Just as how the first number you say in a negotiation tends to influence the final outcome, the first ideas people share in a brainstorming session affects the entire discussion.

Kellogg professor Loran Nordgren explains that sharing ideas in groups isn't always effective. Thanks to conformity, "early ideas tend to have disproportionate influence over the rest of the conversation. They establish the kinds of norms, or cement the idea of what are appropriate examples or potential solutions for the problem."

One solution? A process called "brainwriting." Participants write down their ideas before or at the very beginning of the meeting, and then come together to talk about them.

brainwriting
Brainwriting example from one of Zapier's team retreats
Ideally, ideas are anonymous. Consider having team members put their ideas on Post-It notes on a wall, then ask everyone to vote for their favorites.

Alternatively, you can use a free app like Candor. Candor sends your question to your participants, gathers their responses, and turns each idea into "cards" that you can use to organize your discussions.

3. Use the 6-3-5 Method

One variation of brainwriting, the 6-3-5 method—where 6 people generate 3 ideas in 5 minute—is a simple way to generate 108 ideas in a half hour. You need six participants—ideally not more, as the meeting would become hard to manage. If you only have four or five team members, this method will still work (although you'll have fewer ideas).

Give everyone a separate piece of paper and ask them to write down three ideas in five minutes. Then have them pass their paper to the right. They have another five minutes to write down another three ideas before passing their papers to the right again. Repeat until their paper makes its way back to them.

It's like the game of telephone, reinvented for creative brainstorming.

4. Brainstorm with an "Outsider"

Sometimes, all you need is a new pair of eyes looking at your problem. Ask someone outside your company to brainstorm with you—ideally, someone who's in your role at a company that's not in your space or a direct competitor. For example, if you work in co-marketing at an IT software company, you might brainstorm with a co-marketing professional at a tourism business.

Send each other your questions or prompts ahead of time (like, "I need a name for this new product" or "I want to grow email sign-ups by 20% this month"). Then take turns brainstorming together in-person, over chat, or on Skype.

5. Flip your Worst Ideas

If the mood in your brainstorming session becomes negative, don't try to fight it. Make that energy productive with the "worst idea" exercise.

Ask everyone to write down their craziest, most inane, least feasible ideas. Then challenge them to somehow turn those ideas into good ones—either by changing or adding a key detail, or doing the opposite of what they proposed

You might end up with some fantastic suggestions. Even if you don't, everyone will be more productive after stretching their minds a bit.

6. Encourage Criticism

"Debate encourages divergent thinking and enhances the quality of thought and decisions of the group."
- Charlan Nemeth

One of Osborn's core brainstorming tenets—"no criticism"—is misguided. Charlan Nemeth, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, found that groups encouraged to debate generated 20% more ideas than those told not to critique each other's ideas.

Besides telling your team members to give constructive feedback, you can harness this effect by setting up debates. First, come up with a question or a prompt. If you're searching for ways to increase webinar registrations, for example, you might ask every member of your team to prepare a creative idea to drive registration that costs less than $1,000.

At the brainstorming meeting, then, pair your members off. Have them debate their ideas one group at a time. You might give the first person three minutes to explain their proposal, four minutes for their partner to ask questions, one minute for their partner to critique it, and two minutes for the first person to defend it. Then ask the second person to present their proposal.

For an added twist, tell partners to switch ideas. Not only will this exercise force your team members to challenge their own assumptions, it'll also put them into problem-solving mode.

7. Share Inspiration

Brainstorming shouldn't be an isolated event. To foster a constant stream of ideas, create a shared file where everyone can store their random thoughts and inspiration. That might be a Trello board, Google Drive or Dropbox folder, Pinterest board, or just a text file or Google Doc that everyone adds ideas to.

Ask people to mull over a specific prompt such as "Develop a user-generated content campaign," or find examples of a bigger theme like "Brand awareness plays."

You can even create a room in your team chat app for brainstorming. This approach makes it easy to riff on each other's ideas; for instance, one person might link to a noteworthy campaign, while another might comment with a related thought three hours later.

Brainstorming isn't typically that productive. Add some structure, though, and you can turn a random stream of thoughts into actionable ideas that will actually produce great results.

Still stuck? Check out our guide on How to Generate More Good Ideas—which recommends that you need to come up with a ton of ideas, even bad ideas, to find the good stuff that comes to the surface.

Have your own brainstorming tricks? We'd love to hear how you and your team come up with great new ideas in the comments below!