

Develop messages that consistently deliver at least three of these four pillars of Innovation. Before you send that email, or publish that ad, check back with these four pillars. If not, push your ideas further in order to speak the language of creativity.

Invent Surprising Solutions

It's easy to follow what everyone else is doing. It might take more effort, but you can also attract interest by inventing unexpected solutions.

Don't expect to surprise your audience with the same trick repeatedly. You can either use the same surprise with new people, or new surprises with the same people. Either reinvent your audience, or reinvent your material. Jack-in-the-boxes fail to surprise after a few times.

What if you're a restaurant, and you also want to encourage the use of sign language? How could you apply creativity, and communicate with customers who don't know sign language? At Signs, a restaurant in Toronto, patrons must order in sign language. Icons next to the menu items make it easy for those who haven't a clue how to say "French toast and coffee" using their hands. Most diners enter a completely different world when they sit down for a meal at Signs, and get an experience they can't help talking about.

Turn Something Old into Something New

Are your sales falling? Is your niche becoming obsolete? When it's time to discover creative solutions, look to Innovation.

Who Says a Household Cleaner Can't Be a Toy?

Before World War II, most US homes were heated by coal. The thick coal smoke left black soot marks on nearby wallpaper. How to clean the soot? Noah and Joseph McVicker developed and sold a doughlike cleaning product to be rubbed on the coal stain.

Years later, sales of soot cleaner fell sharply when coal was replaced by natural gas. The brand was on the verge of demise. How to boost sales of an obsolete household cleaner? This brand went in the exact opposite direction, and positioned the soot cleaner as the exact opposite of what it was. It became one of the world's most popular children's toys: Play-Doh.

Play-Doh has inspired over seven hundred million pounds of creativity among children everywhere. Ironically, what once was a cleaner is now the bane of parents everywhere when that brightly colored dough gets smooshed into the carpet. Where's the carpet cleaner that cleans this former wallpaper cleaner?

If your product is becoming outdated or irrelevant, you always have the option to creatively reinvent the old into something entirely new.*

Do the Opposite

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Brands tend to mimic each other, watching to see what everyone else is doing before taking action. For instance, car dealerships have big vinyl signs outside. Pet stores have a dog or cat or bird in the logo. Pharmaceutical companies use the “Rx” symbol. Yes, these are easy shortcuts, but they also make you look like everyone else. How could you stand out? What if you did the exact opposite of what people expect from your brand or category?

A Tropical Island on the Freezing Hudson River
Against the freezing winter wind, I pulled my coat's woolen collar
up around my neck, stomping my feet to feel them inside my
boots. A hundred feet in front of me, a tanned couple in bathing
suits played volleyball on a tropical island.

* Remember Play-Doh's oddly distinctive smell? It was also in the original product, added to mask the underlying chemical smell of the cleaning agent.