



Ideas For The Asking

Use the creative power of questions to produce insights and ideas for innovation and planning

“If you do not ask the right questions, you do not get the right answers. A question asked in the right way often points to its own answer. Asking questions is the A-B-C of diagnosis. Only the inquiring mind solves problems.”

— Edward Hodnett



A question is what an idea looks like just before it's an idea

Ideas are new combinations of existing elements and questions are our most powerful tools for identifying, breaking and creating patterns in order to form new combinations.

“The uncreative mind can spot wrong answers, but it takes a very creative mind to spot wrong questions.”

— Anthony Jay

INFORMATION QUESTIONS (KNOWING)

Generate inputs

Provide factual foundation

Deal with content (what)

1. Any mostly close-ended question you can think of

INSIGHT QUESTIONS (UNDERSTANDING)

Reveal meaning

Help clarify, frame and probe on the issue

Deal with significance (why)

1. Why?
2. What do we want people to think/feel/do? (current state vs. future state)
3. How are we defining success?
4. What has changed?
5. What don't we know?
6. What assumptions are we making? (How do I know this?)
7. What is this really about?
8. What's the “real” business this is a part of? (Is it a “train” or is it “transportation”?)
9. What could our situation be compared to and what can we learn from it?
10. How does our situation fit relationally to the next “largest thing” and next “smallest thing”?
11. What else is going on in the world that could provide context for this?
12. What would the world miss out on if we failed, if this thing didn't exist or happen?
13. What is the highest level good we can imagine coming from this effort?
14. What does this product, service, organization, event *mean* to people?
15. What tension does this create? What tension does this resolve?
16. What would our target audience fight for? Against?
17. Are we starting in the right place?
18. Are we trying to solve “too much” of the problem? “Too little”?
19. Are we trying to get better at something that doesn't matter anymore?
20. What's stopping us? What would we do if you had no fear?

Putting questions to work

- **Prepare in advance. Respond in the moment.**
- **Pause. Listen. Follow the answer.**
- **Empathize. Get into the mind of your audience.**
- **Be vulnerable. Ask what you really want to ask.**
- **Be direct.**
- **Be optimistic. Find a version of the problem you believe you can solve.**
- **Be genuinely curious.**

“The important thing is not to stop questioning.”

— Albert Einstein



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IDEA QUESTIONS (CREATING)

Form connections

Drive tactical planning

Deal with possibilities (what if)

1. **Do Something Real** Think past appearances and messages. Are there experiences we can create that deliver real value to the target audience? What do they *need* us to do for them? What would they be grateful for?
2. **Scale** What would you do if you were trying to convince just one person to do what we want them to do? How could we scale that effort up to larger numbers of people?
3. **Reverse/Flip the Model** What would it look like if we were trying to accomplish the *opposite* of our objective? What does that suggest that we can apply to our efforts? Or what if we turned convention around? For example, instead of the classic “free razor, expensive blades” model, it was expensive razor, free blades? What if the coffee was free but you paid to sit at the café?
4. **Role Play/Role Model** How would someone you admire solve our “problem”? A colleague here in the room? Your parents? Jon Stewart? Carl Sagan? MacGyver? Lady Gaga? Martha Stewart? The Army? Greenpeace? Bruce Springsteen? Malcom Gladwell? What about brands or industries? Who is doing a great job we can learn from? What characterizes their work?
5. **Anthropomorphize** If this situation, product, event, service, etc were a person, how would it act? What would it do? What would it say?
6. **Free Associate** What words, experiences, images or other associations come to mind when you think of our situation? Does it remind you of something from a movie or something that happened to you once? What does it rhyme with? Is it like an animal? What’s funny about this? What do those things suggest about how we tell our story, position our brand, deliver our product, etc.?
7. **Shift the POV** How would certain segments tell our story for us? From a kid’s point of view? Teens? Singles? Couples? Doctors? The homeless? Clergy? Artists?
8. **Dramatize and Showcase** What would it look like if we took our product or service, organization or issue and “shined a light on it?” How can we make it bigger to dramatize a point or showcase the essential elements? Is there a “close-up” of one part of our situation or problem or opportunity that becomes compelling when highlighted?
9. **Connect/Relate/Preempt** How can we take advantage of an upcoming “happening” on the pop culture landscape to connect to, relate to, preempt or insinuate ourselves into? What milestones, anniversaries, events, trends, could help us maximize our opportunity? How does your perception of our situation change when you think of it through the lens of a point in time or an event or occurrence?
10. **Add, Transform, Subtract** Musicians layer sound upon sound. Origami artists transform a single square of paper into complex shapes. Sculptors chip away stone to reveal figures. What happens if we add something? Change the form of something? Remove something? (Variation of SCAMPER: Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to Another Use, Eliminate, Reverse.)
11. **Revisit and Reinvent** Everything old becomes new again, it’s been said. So what can we “steal” from old-fashion solutions to similar situations? What can we borrow from history? How can we apply new technologies to old problems and old technologies to new problems?
12. **Tap the Senses** Almost all ideas focus on sights and sounds, words and images. But what about smells? Tastes? Tactile sensations?