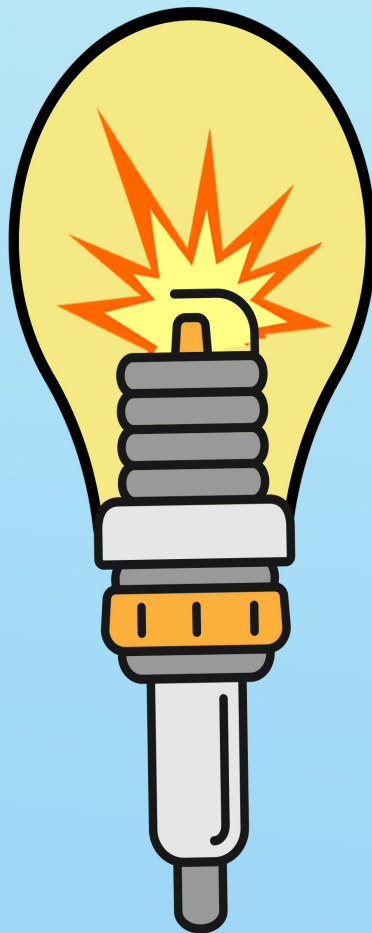


21 Sure-Fire Idea Spark Plugs



By Ben Crain

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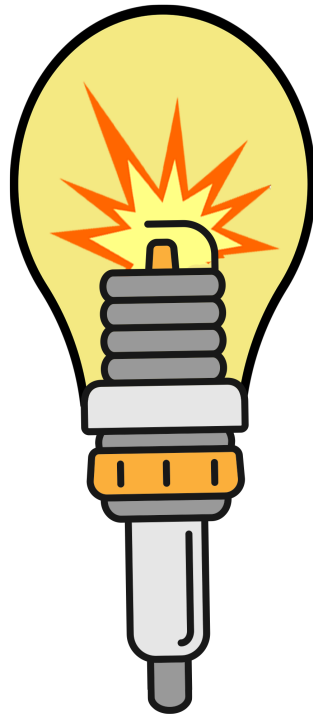
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21 Sure-Fire Idea Spark Plugs

Who says *there are no new ideas*? Fresh ideas and innovations pop into peoples' heads every day — and sometimes in the most unexpected places. I've had ideas hit me like a freight train while taking a shower. One time I actually used shaving cream to write a product name I'd just come up with on the shower wall to make sure I wouldn't forget it while drying off!

But sometimes the creative portion of your brain stalls out and just doesn't seem to want to ignite. It's a problem everyone struggles with now and then, and it's called *Mental Block*. It happens to me (a lot) and it's bound to happen to you as well. To help you overcome this mental blockage, and get your brain firing on all cylinders, I've compiled 21 sure-fire techniques I use whenever I need a good thought starter. I call 'em "*Idea Spark Plugs*" and they're sure to help you get your creative motor up and running in no time. So get ready to start your engine!



Idea Spark Plug #1:



Ask “What If?”

What if we had eyes in the palms of our hands? Would a handshake be considered an invasion of privacy?

What if pigs could fly? Would a well-made umbrella be required every time you took a walk?

What if the sky were paisley? What if sheep could read? What if you could lose weight by binging on pizza? What if...?

When you ask yourself *What if* questions, you dislodge your mind from thinking rationally and switch it to irrationally. By juxtaposing your thinking, you open your mind to conjuring up new ideas. And just think...*what if* it works?



Idea Spark Plug #2:



Shuffle Your Thinking

We all think in an orderly manner. It's in our genetics. Sometimes when you shuffle up your thinking, you see things in a different light.

If you've come up with a basic premise of what you're trying to achieve, you probably have a rough outline of why you're trying to come up with an original idea, what it will do and what it ultimately needs to accomplish.

So, shuffle it up. Try taking it out of order. Then see what develops. You might be surprised at what you come up with when you take your thoughts in a whole new direction.



Idea Spark Plug #3:



Go With Your Gut

How many times have you said, “I should have gone with my gut in making that decision”? Well, the same holds true when brainstorming ideas.

As you’re trying to come up with a great idea, you’ll almost always think of several others along the way. Some will seem safe and logical. Some will seem off-the-wall and completely unorthodox. Some will seem ho-hum and just another throw-away. The key is to write them all down, go through them — one at a time — then put them away and go do something else. Taking a walk is good! Later, when you re-visit your list, try not to over analyze your ideas. See if one stands out. If so, *go with your gut* and try to develop it to the next level. Nine times out of ten you’ll discover you made the right choice.



Idea Spark Plug #4:



Give It A K.I.S.S.

Anyone in the world of marketing should know about the K.I.S.S. factor, i.e. **Keep It Simple Stupid**. Okay, some think that definition is a little harsh and thus define it as **Keep It Seriously Simple** (I prefer the other). Either way, the point is to not get caught up in over thinking the concept, but to let the ideas organically flow out of your head just as they are — with *no* embellishments.

This is sometimes easier said than done. When a good idea comes to us, we tend to want to immediately start working it out and take it to the next level. This can actually stifle our thinking in coming up with other or even *better* ideas.

Instead of jumping head-first into the creative development phase, pat yourself on the back for coming up with what seems like a great idea, put it aside, then keep working up more rough ideas. Once you've written down several others, you might discover your original idea wasn't so great.



Idea Spark Plug #5:



Imagine Someone Else Doing it

A few years back, the acronym WWJD became a popular coded symbol that was seen on bracelets, t-shirts and scribbled on notebooks. It stood for What Would Jesus Do and it encouraged those who understood the code to change their point of view by envisioning how Jesus might have handled whatever situation came to mind. Though it may have helped lots of Christians remember to stay on the straight and narrow, it also taught them how to change their perspective by looking at a situation through someone else's eyes.

This concept also holds true when trying to create or develop an idea. If you're going after a specific target or niche, put yourself in their shoes and try thinking of what idea might appeal to them and motivate them to react in a positive manner. If you're trying to solve a problem, think of who is directly affected and what perspective they may have in resolving the situation. If you're trying to come up with an article, blog or story idea, think of the writers you like and how they might tackle the assignment. By thinking like others you might actually find an original idea you can call your own.



Idea Spark Plug #6:



Channel Your Inner Child

Remember, when you were just a kindergartener, and your teacher asked you a question like “How do you put an elephant in a refrigerator?” Most adults would simply say it would be impossible. But you, a wide-eyed, innocent youth with a fertile mind — unspoiled by societal logic — might simply answer: “Open the door, put the elephant inside, then shut the door.” Ahh...the wisdom of childhood!

Sometimes this childhood logic is all it takes to come up with some extremely creative and original ideas. The key is getting your mind to think like a child. So go grab a can of Playdough and roll out a snake or two. Build a fort out of couch cushions. Squeeze out a pile of ketchup on a plate and finger paint a little. Or just grab a copy of the book your mom or dad used to read to you at bedtime (my favorite was always something by Dr. Seuss). Do whatever it takes to get yourself into the mindset of a 6-year old. Then re-visit your project from his or her perspective. You just might come up with something “wayyyyy cool!”



Idea Spark Plug #7:



Establish A Limit

Sometimes putting a little pressure on yourself can be a good thing. Especially when you think you have all the time in the world before the project's due date.

If you're like me, you're a procrastinator with a capital "P". Back in college, I was always the one pulling a weekend all-nighter, pounding down massive cups of coffee or Mountain Dew while pounding out a term paper that I'd had all semester to complete. Fortunately, some weren't half bad!

The problem is when you don't establish a deadline for coming up with the initial idea, you end up spending more time creating, less time developing, and even lesser time producing the finished project. And that can lead to the finished result looking a bit sloppy because it wasn't fully thought out. So give yourself a break!

Before you begin brainstorming, determine your project's drop-dead due date, then break up the process into a segmented timeline. Once you've established the allotted time limit for conceptualizing the initial idea, stick to it like glue. Setting up tight parameters will force you into focusing on just the idea itself and not get distracted with adding all the bells and whistles that are usually figured out during the creative development stage. You'll be pleasantly surprised to discover how putting a little more pressure on your conceptualizing phase will help you squeeze out better ideas.



Idea Spark Plug #8:



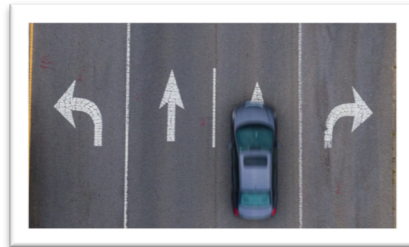
Improvise

Have you ever used a paper clip to hold your shirt cuff together after losing a button? Or scraped the frost off your windshield with a credit card because you forgot your scraper? How about dipping your egg roll into a mixture of ketchup and grape jelly because you were out of sweet and sour sauce (actually, it's not bad)? If so, *congratulations* — you've proven you have the mental ability to substitute unexpected items for expected ones in order to achieve the same goal. In other words, you know how to *Improvise!*

This process can also come in handy when you've spent hours trying to come up with a great idea but, unfortunately, no luck. Next time, take a minute to look at the list of what you've come up with so far. Are some of the ideas similar? Do they contain similar words? Are you seeing some form of a pattern? If so, get in touch with your inner *McGyver* and try to rig up substitutes for some of the words or phrases. Plugging in different words will help you see your ideas in a whole new light. It may not make them better, but it will jar your thinking and help you discover which ideas are the strongest. Best of all, it won't take a coat hanger, duct tape, or a scrap piece of tin foil to get the job done!



Idea Spark Plug #9:



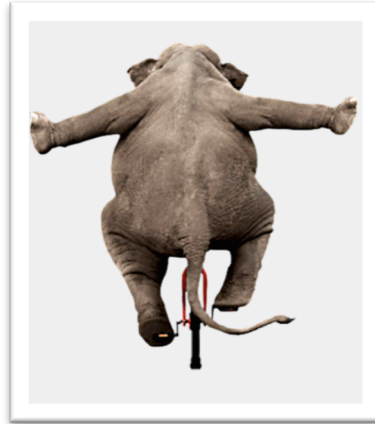
Change Your Point Of View

An old parable describes a group of blind men hearing an elephant trumpeting in the town square. Curious to find out what was making that noise, each blind man approached the elephant from a different direction, then used their hands to determine what the creature must look like. One blind man touching its trunk exclaimed the creature must be similar to a snake. Another, stroking its large earflap, disagreed. He stated it must be some type of winged creature. Yet another, feeling its large leg determined the creature to be tall in stature, like a pine tree. Finally, the last blind man grasped one of the elephant's tusks and was certain that the creature was more like a spear. As they walked away, arguing, each thought his description was the correct one. Actually, they all were. But just from a different point of view.

Think about this story the next time you find yourself kicking the tires on an idea you just came up with. For instance, imagine you've just come up with an idea to sell hot dogs in the park using signs featuring a cute wiener dog's picture. What if you were to change the point of view, and put the signs on real wiener dogs? You could have several of them walking around on leashes to get attention all throughout the park. See how this method can add *legs* (pun intended) to your concept? Whatever your concept, try changing the point of view to serve it up differently and see it in a whole new light.



Idea Spark Plug #10:



Think BIG!

“So I’m out on this lake, fishin’ for large mouth bass. All of a sudden my pole practically bends in half as something BIG hits my line. Next thing ya know, it’s pullin’ me and the boat out towards the middle of the cove. That’s when I seen it jump. Musta been a bass at least four or five feet long and weighin’ in at close to a hunert pounds! I’da reeled it right in — no problem — if’n my line hadn’t broke. Dang the luck!”

Yessir, you’ve probably heard *millions* of these types of stories. Everyone loves to exaggerate now and then (in fact, I just did). We do it not because we want to lie. We do it because we don’t just want to give the facts — we want to tell a story. We like to captivate whoever we’re talking to and keep them hanging on every sentence. It’s one of the oldest forms of storytelling.

It’s fun to use a bit of exaggeration when you’re brainstorming ideas or developing the concept. Making your concept bigger than life allows your thoughts to go in many directions. Once you’ve taken it to the boundaries of absurdity, you can always reel it back in to a more reasonable level. Just make sure you don’t break your line!



Idea Spark Plug #11:



Take Your Brain Out For A Walk

After racking your brain for hours on end, it's good to detach and just let it wander for a while. Give it a chance to just ramble around and take in whatever it wants. This is the magic time where off-the-wall thoughts just seem to pop into your head. Some are worthless. Some are weird. Some are so out of left field, you're embarrassed to write them down. But sometimes these little sparks of wisdom can turn into big ideas.

To help guide your thoughts while your mind is in wander mode, try building word associations using key words or phrases from your project at hand. Then jot down the first word that comes to mind. Continue building on each word until you have a string of all your thoughts written down. For example: *Money-Bank-River-Water-Faucet-Shower-Curtain-Window-Glass-Drink-Martini-Gin-Rummy-Cards* — ETC. Take a look at your list and see if any of the new words you've just come up with stand out. If so, try building additional word association strings to form word clusters. Using this exercise will help stimulate your brain into coming up with abstract thoughts and help you find that "creative gold nugget".



Idea Spark Plug #12:



Merge Your Thoughts

Ever try combining two unlikely things together then being surprised at something totally unsuspected? Like when your kids add Elmer's Glue to Dawn Dishwashing Detergent to make that messy concoction known as "Slime"? Well, this holds true when it comes to ideas.

Just like when they combined a sausage and a roll to create the *Hot Dog*, or a video camera and a doorbell to create the *Video Doorbell* (bet they had a tough time coming up with that name), try combining two or more ideas you've been working on and see what other types of ideas you can come up with.



Idea Spark Plug #13:



Check Your Vision

In the early 90's, years before he was known as Ace Ventura or the "Dumb And Dumber Guy", Jim Carrey was a struggling comedian who could barely pay rent. Realizing he needed something to spark his career, Carrey began to visualize himself becoming one of the biggest comedians on both stage and screen. To solidify his vision, he actually wrote himself a check for ten million dollars and carried it around in his wallet to help him visualize what his success would eventually look like. In 1994, his vision became a reality with the success of his hit movie "Dumb And Dumber". His net earnings for the film: \$10 million!

Visualization can also be helpful when you're stuck, trying to come up with the perfect solution to a problem (like a big idea!) Take a break from your work and just sit back and visualize what you hope the results will be. Could this new detergent really brighten clothes back to their original color? Could this revolutionary new hand saw actually cut through almost any type of board in half as many strokes as other saws? Often times you'll discover that what you visualize can become the blueprint for the perfect solution and, ultimately, your success.



Idea Spark Plug #14:



Look For An Alias

Ever wonder what the difference is between a Sun Roof and a Moon Roof? How about a Domestic Engineer vs. a House Cleaner? Or maybe a Couch vs. a Sofa? Answer: *Not a darn thing!*

Sometimes all it takes is a brand new shiny name to make an item appear to be better than it originally was. Marketers do it all the time when they want to freshen up or add new life to a sluggish brand, or de-emphasize product attributes that could be considered unappealing to the target. Remember when *Honey Crisp* cereal was called *Sugar Crisp*? Or when KFC was known as Kentucky Fried Chicken? Name changing is a common way to make your brain re-evaluate an item's meaning or importance. Different words evoke different interpretations or emotions.

The next time you're brainstorming ideas, pick out some of the key words then make a separate list. Try coming up with substitute words for each word on the list. This new list of words should jog your brain into re-evaluating your original thinking. It should also give you a different perspective and help you decide whether or not your first idea was your best idea.



Idea Spark Plug #15:



Color Outside The Lines

When you're working on a rational project, using rational methods to try to rationally come up with a clever idea — it's actually the best time to start thinking *irrationally!* Some call it "Thinking Outside the Box". Others call it "Coloring Outside the Lines." I call it "Absolutely *Essential!*" if you ever hope to create an original idea that has yet to see the light of day.

Getting successful results from using this technique is sometimes easier said than done. It's hard to get out of the routine of looking at the world as rational and orderly. The sun always rises at dawn and sets at dusk. Two plus two always equals four. And if you drop a 10 pound dumbbell on your pinky toe it will ALWAYS hurt (trust me on this one!)

But when you take an irrational approach to concepting, you sometimes discover a better way of solving your problem. For instance, during World War I, the US military took an irrational approach and used Picasso's Cubist style art to create more efficient camouflage patterns for tanks. It actually made the tanks blend in with the surrounding environment, making them much harder to spot by the enemy. Try using a similar irrational approach next time you need a rational solution.



Idea Spark Plug #16:



Go Away!

We've all reached the point where our brains go into overload and just need to shut down for a while. This is the best time to put down your pen, or close your laptop, and simply go away. You'll be amazed at the thoughts that will occur while you're away from your work, and that you can now bring to the table upon your return.

Some of my favorite things to do are:

- Take a drive in the country and just look at the scenery
- Go for a walk — even if it's just up the street or around the block
- Call a friend — you'd be surprised at how a good conversation can be a great distraction to help you get those creative juices flowing once again
- Take a long, hot shower (my personal favorite) — it's amazing how the luxurious isolation combined with the sound of the water spraying against your skin can relax and rejuvenate your thinking



Idea Spark Plug #17:



Take A More *Natural* Approach

If you're struggling to come up with an original idea, or trying to discover a new way to solve an age-old problem, try what artists, architects and engineers have done for centuries — turn to nature.

After observing birds in flight, Leonardo di Vinci sketched out various flying machine designs almost 400 years before the Wright brothers took off at Kitty Hawk. More recently, Velcro came to be after the inventor noticed the way burrs stuck to his sweater after walking through a dense forest.

Observing the simple logic of nature opens up your mind, expands your thinking and makes you more prone to recognize a germ of an idea that you might have overlooked before. Try using this technique and you'll soon discover that Mother Nature can also be the *Mother of Invention*.



Idea Spark Plug #18:



Get Outta That Rut!

Everyone has their routines. Your *Morning Coffee/Read The Paper* routine. The *Same Route You've Always Taken To Work* routine. And, of course, the *Always Eat One Hot French Fry From The Sack, While Pulling Away From The Drive-Thru Window* routine. Daily routines create order within our lives and basically keep us sane. But sometimes simply changing your routine can jar your mind into changing its perspective, and open up a whole new thinking pattern. This can be extremely beneficial when it comes to brainstorming.

Try taking a different route to work tomorrow and you might discover a shorter commute, less traffic, or a new place to grab a snack on the way in. Try changing up the brainstorming process you usually go through and you might find yourself coming up with better ideas even faster than before.



Idea Spark Plug #19:



Become The Idea

Okay, this one might be a bit on the nutty side. I'm sure anyone who has ever done theatrical improv will be able to relate. In case you aren't familiar with this somewhat embarrassing theatrical exercise (yep, I had to do it in college — and I SUCKED at it!) , it's where you are given the name of an object and then told to *become* that object by improvising movements and sounds which you believe best represent it. Needless to say there are usually some rather avant-garde performances — especially for words such as Daffodil, Shaving Cream or Pumpkin Pie.

But this can actually be a fun and enlightening exercise when you're trying to work out an idea that's not quite where you want it to be. Go ahead and just *be the idea!*

For instance, if you're trying come up with a name for a new product, imagine *you're* the product. Are you fast-acting? Are you soft and gentle? Are you made from the finest Spanish leather? Or has there never been anything quite like you? By acting out any of these product attributes, you'll soon begin to feel the personality of the product. By bringing that personality to life, you'll discover the true essence of the brand and have an easier time coming up with strong names. Just prepare yourself for a little embarrassment...



Idea Spark Plug #20:



Try Letting Go

You've probably heard or seen the famous quote: *"If you love something, set it free. If it returns, it's yours you see. And if it doesn't, it just wasn't meant to be."* These words of wisdom can be applied to most anything you hold near and dear to your heart. Including ideas.

When brainstorming, it's easy to fall in love with the first idea that seems to fit the bill, or solve the problem. But if you resolve to be impulsive, and go straight into developing this new "diamond in the rough", you might miss out on other gems.

I find what works best is to go ahead and mark this new idea you've fallen for, then continue brainstorming other ideas as if your favorite one doesn't even exist. Often times you'll discover your original idea isn't as strong as some of the newer ones. However if it continues to hold the top position, then, as the saying goes, *it was meant to be!*



Idea Spark Plug #21:

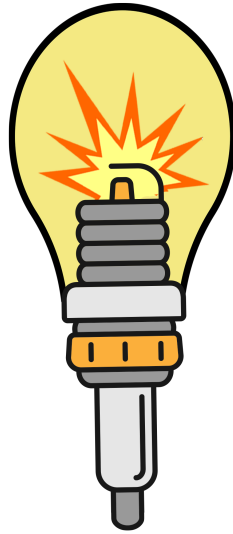


Don't Overlook The Obvious

So this SCUBA diver is swimming along at 20 feet when he notices a guy at the same depth, but wearing no gear. The diver swims on down to 50 feet when he comes across the same guy. Amazed and confused, the diver pulls out his waterproof chalkboard and writes down "How are you able to stay down this deep without any diving equipment?" The guy quickly grabs the board and writes "Because I'm drowning you idiot!"

Sometimes we get so caught up in the details we often overlook the obvious. Like squinting and straining your eyes to read in a dim room when you could simply turn on a light. Or, after your kids have gotten out of their nightly bubble bath, blindly feeling around for toys in the bottom of the tub, instead of just opening up the drain. Often times going the obvious route can be much harder than you'd think. Ever overlooked an idea because it seemed so simple, surely it couldn't work? Usually, you're kicking yourself later when someone else has the same idea, then gets successful results.

Many times a big idea can seem so obvious, we're afraid to consider it as an option. Don't fall into this trap! Never underestimate the simplicity of a good, solid idea and NEVER be afraid to at least investigate an obvious solution.



Conclusion

It's often said "*The obvious answer has been right in front of your nose all along.*" But sometimes it takes a little *spark* to help you cut through the clutter and focus in on the solution. I hope the various exercises throughout this guide have helped you find *your* focus.

As you are tasked with various challenges to solve, you'll discover some of these *Idea Spark Plugs* work better than others. It all depends on the situation, as well as your frame of mind. If one doesn't seem to be getting your creative juices flowing, move on to another. Over time you'll most likely choose just a couple as your "go-to" Spark Plugs. But keep this guide as a handy reference. It's nice to know you've always got plenty of back-ups should you need them.

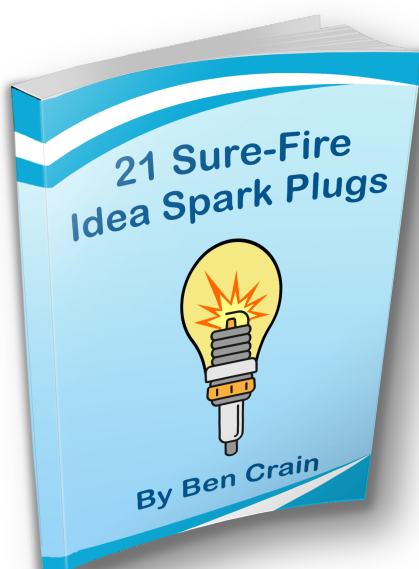
Here's to you never losing your *creative spark!*

Ben Crain

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About The Author

Ben Crain has led and participated in numerous brainstorming sessions covering everything from naming new products to developing national marketing campaigns. He entered the business as an advertising copywriter — developing radio, television and print advertising for regional and national clients such as McDonald's, Anheuser-Busch and Monsanto.

Over time, he started his own agency specializing in wine, beer & spirits, quick service restaurants and consumer packaged goods. Some of his clients have included: Corona Extra, Modelo Brands, Margaritaville Cocktails, Mike's Hard Lemonade, Hardee's, Perkins Restaurants and Johnsonville Pork Sausage.

Now, as an independent consultant and owner of Hunu Marketing, his objective remains the same: provide simple, smart and strategic marketing for exceptional clients. And have lots of fun in the process!

If you'd like find out how Ben automated his agency experience into a profitable online business, click below and check out the [Automated Sales & Success](#) webinar. It's absolutely free to attend and it will show you in simple to follow steps how easy it is to get your own automated digital marketing business started right away. Automated Sales & Success will help you put your profits on autopilot and start making some serious income!

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