

10 Ways to Get Inspired by the World Around You

January 22, 2008
by Sam Harrison

How many times have you heard someone say that there are no new ideas? While that may not be exactly true, you can learn a lot by "borrowing" ideas from the world around you. Are we condoning plagiarism? No way. Serendipitous inspiration? Absolutely.

1. Be a Borrower

One way to find an idea is by looking at how others solve problems. For example, B.F. Goodrich wanted to give customers an easy way to put on rubber galoshes. He spotted the answer in a fastener Gideon Sundbach had developed to help soldiers quickly don uniforms. Goodrich refined the idea and installed it in galoshes, calling his device a "zipper" because of its sound.

In the 1950s, fast-food restaurants added drive-through lanes to their buildings to serve car-loving customers. It didn't take long for banks and dry cleaners to borrow the idea. Today, all types of businesses use the drive-through concept: Little White Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas offers drive-through ceremonies. Loma Linda Medical Center administers flu shots while patients sit in their cars. Seigl's Lumber Yard provides drive-through lanes for customers to purchase tools and materials.

The Hyper Carbon material used in tennis rackets was first developed to stabilize satellites. Home smoke detectors and scratch-resistant lenses also stemmed from space-industry applications.

Do it yourself. List three innovative brands or disciplines unlike your own. Explore their problem-solving methods. What can you use?

2. Explore the Masters for Material

When artist Willem de Kooning came to America in the 1920s, he met a young painter named Arshile Gorky. Lacking formal training, Gorky learned classical techniques by trying to re-create masterpieces. De Kooning was impressed and borrowed the process. Years later, de Kooning talked of using Rubens in his own work, fusing classical and modern into a new form. What masters of innovation do you admire? Edison or Einstein? Curie or Carver? Picasso or Pavlov? Dali or Disney?

List idea masters you admire. Explore their lives, methods and ideas. See what can you can borrow.

3. Enjoy the Art of Imitation

Film director James Brooks needed visual ideas for a pool scene in "Spanglish." He didn't have to look very far; he found them in a D.J. Hall painting hanging on his wall. The artwork captures a type of upscale West Coast woman, Brooks told The New York Times, much like the character played by Tea Leoni in "Spanglish." In the movie, Leoni actually wears the shirt Hall's model wore, and the set includes the painting's banana plants and African lilies.

And just as art inspires filmmakers, film inspires designers. Watching "Something's Gotta Give," David DeMattei, designer for Williams-Sonoma Home, admired several upholstered headboards used in the film. As a result, DeMattei created five headboard designs for the Home collection.

Go behind the curtains. Borrow from films, theaters, concert halls, sporting arenas and theme parks.

4. Look at Other Businesses

Where do you find ideas for something as commonplace as aluminum foil? Mark Nielsen, an in-house designer for Publix Super Markets, faced that question when he created packaging for the chain's brand of foil. He went back in his memory to a night with friends at a Japanese steakhouse. "A waiter wrapped our leftovers in foil, then made sculptures of the containers," he says. "One looked like Green Goblin from 'Spiderman.' Another was a rose." Nielsen spotted an idea. "I started thinking that there's no reason foil sculptures have to be only for leftovers," he says. "Why not make them for the heck of it? And that's what I began doing."

He created hand-sized elephants, moose, alligators and turtles. He then photographed these shiny creatures and gave them prominent positions on boxes of foil. The result is fun, eye-grabbing packaging for an everyday product. "Mark's concept injected life into what's usually straightforward packaging," says Tim Cox, director of creative services at Publix. "The foil sculptures help differentiate our private label, and customers give great feedback about the whimsical look."

What businesses give you imaginative, energetic service? Explore their ideas and techniques. What can you borrow from restaurants? Hotels? Retailers? Others?

5. Observe and Take Note

Ideas have short shelf lives. We find them one second, forget them the next. That's why it's smart to capture ideas and insights at the scene of the crime. Book them before they flee. Take notes.

Leonardo da Vinci is arguably history's most famous note-taker. His notebooks overflowed with sketches and notes on nature, art, architecture. Thomas Edison loaded thousands of notebooks with insights and diagrams. And today's creative people are equally diligent about recording thoughts and ideas.

Canadian designer Bruce Mau says, "The single most necessary device for me is a notebook. I just plow through notebooks." Gail Anderson, Rolling Stone alumna and current SpotCo art director, calls herself a note-taker and language observer. "I love making notes about type I've seen on store signs or on sides of buildings," she says. Note-taking gives the creative process time to breathe, says Erin Whelan, Real Simple art director. "I love recording really out-there ideas," she says. "It's so great to start at crazy places and then reach middle-ground, smart solutions." Eva Maddox, principal of Perkins + Will, has a journal in hand when she travels, but not for writing. "I draw," she says. "I draw at least one picture in my journal each day."

Capture ideas while they last. Ideas often show up as snippets of conversation, views through windows, books on tables. They linger for a moment, then—zap—they're gone. Take verbal and visual notes.

6. Borrow From the Past

AvroKO, a celebrated group of Manhattan architects and designers, knows the genius of borrowing. Especially after AvroKO's team captured a coveted James Beard Award for creative restaurant design. Designing a restaurant in the city's Lower East Side, AvroKO paid tribute to the neighborhood's garment history, according to New York magazine. Stanton Social's backlit wine wall was inspired by herringbone fabric. Banquette pillows are held in place with leather straps mimicking men's suspenders. Lamp shades borrow from the curved patterns of old-fashioned girdles.

AvroKO wisely looks over many fences for inspiration. For Sapa restaurant, its designers studied a Vietnamese mountaintop village where wealthy French families vacationed in the 1800s. Asian wire lanterns, French casement windows and garden urns give Sapa an Asian-yet-Parisian ambiance. And for Public restaurant, AvroKO turned to municipal buildings from the 1930s. Decor includes bronze post-office boxes, restroom doors with mail slots, library-card files—even menus made from government forms.

Places to peruse for your next idea: Fashion—consider forgotten styles and patterns. International resorts—bypass today's hot spots and go back in time. Architecture—find elements reflecting the brands you work with.

7. Don't be a NIHilist

A nihilist (lowercase) thinks nothing has real existence. A NIHilist thinks nothing exists except that created by his own mind or company—a disciple of the Not Invented Here philosophy. Not Invented Here held a smidgen of legitimacy in days of vast research labs filled with engineers at IBM, P&G and other mega firms. But that era has ended. More than a quarter of P&G's innovations now come from outside sources. IBM depends on strategic partnerships. Even self-reliant Apple now joins hands with Motorola and Hewlett-Packard. Washington Mutual reaches across the aisle toward retailers to create customer-friendly financial centers.

And products from one industry inspire ideas in another industry. Electric toothbrushes inspired the idea of the Dawn Power Dish Brush. Ballpoint pens inspired the idea of the Clorox Whitening Pen. Listerine PocketPaks inspired the idea of Hartz Dental Breath Strips for Dogs.

Open minds uncover ideas in hundreds of fertile fields. Have you walked away from Not Invented Here? Or are you still being NIHilistic?

8. Open Your Mind

Hallmark Cards finds inspiration and avoids Not Invented Here by opening its doors to outside influences. "We value getting our people out of cubes and into cities," says Scott Orazem, director of design studios. Hallmark designers, writers and photographers regularly tour metro areas for creative exploration. "These trips are purely for renewal and inspiration," says Mark Spencer, program director.

On a Chicago tour, participants explored museums and architecture, art fairs and shops. They dined at new restaurants and hit shows at Steppenwolf Theater. In Washington, a Hallmark group studied history and politics, theater and art. And the Santa Fe tour covered art colonies and Native American culture. "People return with broad knowledge and strong inspiration," Spencer says. "For example, one designer created beautiful gift wrap inspired by theater costumes she admired in Chicago."

In addition to going out into the world, Hallmark brings the world in. A gallery in its Kansas City, MO, headquarters hosts 10 shows a year. Recent shows focused on watercolors, embroidered fabric, antique furniture and a 19th-century photographic process. "Each show runs four weeks," Spencer says. "People from throughout the company visit for inspiration."

Hallmark also conducts an in-house lecture series, pulling in creative experts to share their work and experiences. Recent guests include poets, book designers and poster printers. "We seek ways to open our minds," Orazem says. "We engage with people outside our world to exchange ideas."

What are you doing to open doors and minds?

9. Pick up the Trash

More and more people find ideas in found objects. "Right now I have little bars of soap piled all around my workspace," says Kristy Moore, art director at Martha Stewart Living. "I get inspired by the packaging, the soft colors, the way words are stamped and etched in the surfaces." San Francisco-based designer Bill Cahan gathers sidewalk stuff while walking to work: an apple core, a cabinet lock, a wood scrap. He piles these found objects in his studio and sifts through them for inspiration. And SpotCo's Gail Anderson finds ideas in salt-and-pepper shakers and bottle caps gathered through the years. "I've also swiped typography from old matchbooks, tobacco tins and crate labels," she says.

Designers often use found objects as creative materials. A lamp shade made from Styrofoam cups. Another made from plastic stir sticks. A dividing curtain made from discarded tea bags. Joe Duffy, founder of Duffy & Partners, embeds found objects into portraits—oak leaves found on a tree-lined street in Paris, a tribal headdress found in Thailand. Any random object can be inspiring.

See what you can find—and use—today.

10. Stay Where You Are

Sometimes you need to move. And sometimes you just need to stay still.

Charles Pajeau sat in his living room and, for the first time, really watched his children build small bridges with their collection of pencils and thread spools. Soon afterwards, Pajeau invented Tinkertoys.

Italian designer Antonio Citterio was enjoying movie night at home with his wife and two children. He suddenly noticed they were seated in a straight line, like passengers on a crowded plane. This gave Citterio the idea for a new family-seating concept for B&B Italia, a semi-circular sofa shaped somewhat like a banana.

Because she was pregnant, Spanish designer Patricia Urquiola was paying extra attention to baby dresses. Inspired by the smocking on one little girl's frock, she used the stitching to design her Smock chair for Moroso furniture.

Dan Groggin, an unknown New York City actor, received a nun's habit from a friend as a joke. Groggin put the habit on an old mannequin and posed it around his apartment—washing dishes, vacuuming and performing other household chores. One day, while watching guests laugh at the mannequin, Groggin spotted an idea. Grabbing a pad, he began creating the play "Nonsense," filled with silly songs and skits. "Nonsense" and its sequels have grossed more than \$300 million in ticket sales and earned Groggin more than \$7 million.

Sit and explore where you are. What's happening right in front of your eyes?

Sam Harrison is the author of several creativity books and a frequent HOW Conference speaker and writer for the magazine.
www.zingzone.com