

How to: Action Storm



The Action Mill

One of our go-to tools is the Action Storm, which we use it to get an understanding of what people in the room are thinking about and then to jump from that understanding to actions: things we can do that embody our common understanding.

Ingredients:

- Between 2 and 10 people, all trying to understand the same problem
- As many Post-it note pads and sharpies as there are people
- A big, blank wall
- A table
- A facilitator

The first task of the facilitator is to distill a prompting question to kick off the Action Storm. This is usually informed by a sensemaking exercise, or discussion to help the group get a sense of what problem they're trying to solve.

The key to forming the prompting question is to be specific about who would take an action, where, and if possible when.

***Example:** For the one design session, participants were asked “You’re a student. What object that belonged to your grandparents could you bring to show and tell that would demonstrate how their connections, ideas, jobs and history influenced you?”*

This question is just the starting point – the group may wander off from it and wind up in a very different place than the question suggested. The key is to ground the brainstorm and give people a handle so they can jump in without worrying about what they're “supposed” to be doing.

Brainstorming is about finding ideas that you wouldn't think of on your own — it's about being wildly creative in order to unearth good ideas. To do it successfully, you have to follow some ground rules.

It is important to note that the energy of the people participating in this process will sometimes drop off in the middle of this exercise. The facilitator's job is to help the group move through these ups and downs. Pushing through the troughs often leads to better ideas.

Action Storm: Facilitator instructions

1. **Prepare:** Gather everyone around a table and give each person a sharpie and a yellow Post-it pad.
2. **Review the ground rules:**
 - Defer judgement — wait until later to judge your ideas and the ideas other people have
 - Go for quantity — come up with as many ideas as you can
 - The more outrageous the idea, the better
 - Write the first thing that comes to mind — there are no correct answers
 - Work in silence until it's time to discuss your results
3. **Start the ball rolling.** Ask the participants the prompting question, and then have them write down 3 ideas, one per Post-it, and put them in the center of the table. Remind them to be specific and concise.
4. **Build off the initial ideas.** People then draw Post-its out of the pool and read them as "stimulation" Post-it. They write down an idea inspired by the Post-it they picked up and then toss both the stimulation Post-it and the new one back into the pool.
Remind participants:
Once you start building off ideas, you can go in any direction your mind takes you. You no longer have to focus exclusively on the prompting question.
Don't browse the pool of cards for inspiration—grab one randomly and write down the first idea that comes to mind.
5. **Continue** this process for at least 20 minutes.
6. **Cluster** the Post-its. Instruct participants to look over the pool and pick up two Post-its that seem like they belong together. Place these two in an empty portion of the wall. Then keep moving other like items into that cluster, or into a cluster that someone else started. If, when reviewing someone else's cluster, it doesn't quite make sense to you, please feel free to rearrange the items until the cluster makes sense. Continue this process until the group settles on a set of clusters, but encourage people to continue to rearrange until they are satisfied.
7. **Name** the clusters. Give each person a different colored Post-it pad and asked to name every cluster so that every cluster has the same number of names as there are participants. (This ensures that every person reads every idea.)
8. **Discuss** which clusters stand out, which were surprising, which move or inspire the group to want to develop them.

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