

LET YOUR CREATIVITY BLOSSOM

BY LISA BAGGERMAN HAZEN

It's not enough to be creative. If you can't harvest your brilliant ideas and bring them to light, they'll wither and die. Here's how to make your creative inspirations bloom.

You probably have a notebook—as most designers do—where you record your creative ideas. It may contain sketches for that brilliant self-promotion piece you've been meaning to create, ideas for your friend's wedding invitation—that you haven't quite gotten around to just yet. Imagined logos for future projects. And ideas for that T-shirt design that's going to sell like gangbusters.

You're in good company if your notebook is brimming with ideas that have never seen the light of day. For most designers, coming up with creative ideas isn't the problem. Rather, the problem is that the skills that come with a creative mind are often at odds with productivity (see "Uproot Your Obstacles to Creativity" on page 60 for examples). And that's where Behance comes in. Behance is a company whose mission is to empower creative professionals to make their ideas happen through what it calls "Productive Creativity."

"All too often, great ideas never materialize due to lack of productivity, inefficient networks and poor accountability," says Scott Belsky, one of Behance's 5 founders. The founders spent more than six months interviewing hundreds of successful creative individuals, asking them how they made their ideas happen,

Their collective wisdom provided the foundation for the company, which offers products and services for the creative industry: The Behance Think Tank is responsible for research and development. Action

Method Products are offered as effective, well-designed tools for boosting productivity. The Behance Network is a free and open platform that creative professionals can use to post their latest work, manage their portfolios and build contacts. And the Creative Index is a global directory of portfolios and websites that belong to creative professionals.

Dig INTO THE "ACTION METHOD"

At the heart of Behance's methodology is a concept called the "Action Method." It involves three steps:

1. Capture Action Steps, Relentlessly

During a brainstorming session, team meeting or on the run, ideas arrive in a flurry of other activity and can be lost unless they're captured and transformed into action steps. Action steps point to tasks to be completed. Each action step should start with a verb (ie: follow up with x, review y, meet with z).

2. Tend to Your Backburner

Keep a "backburner" to catch ideas that might someday require action, or just to clear your mind of the little and non-urgent things. Preserve your creative energy, and focus on other action steps.

3. File Reference Items, Sparingly

Keep only the notes, articles and sketches that you need. Avoid clutter.

UPROOT YOUR OBSTACLES TO CREATIVITY

In many cases, lack of creativity isn't the problem. Rather, it's the abundance of creativity. The Behance team isn't interested in generating or preserving creativity. Rather, they're interested in harnessing the creativity you already have and making it more productive. Here's what founder Scott Belsky identifies as the greatest obstacles to making ideas happen.

- 1 A LOVE FOR IDEA GENERATION**
"Creative professionals and teams have the tendency to jump from idea to idea—and fail to execute or follow through," Belsky says. "As creatives, we love the process of brainstorming and generating ideas. However, when it comes to taking action, we tend to get disorganized. Our passion is one of our greatest obstacles. Of course, it's also a gift. What we need is discipline."
- 2 LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY**
"Creatives often generate ideas in isolation," Belsky says. "Given our tendency to generate many ideas, we undernourish them. Gradually, even great ideas disappear unless we have a mechanism to be held accountable."
- 3 NOTETAKING**
"Drawing sketches amid notes, next steps and future ideas is a huge problem," Belsky points out about the doodling pastime. "Often, only a few hours after a meeting, the mix of 'stuff' on the paper becomes a mishmash, only to sit stagnant and gather dust."
- 4 INADEQUATE PROFESSIONAL REPRESENTATION**
"Especially among creative freelancers, we noticed a real struggle to disseminate work efficiently and represent oneself professionally," Belsky says. Commit yourself to keeping your portfolio website updated, and communicate with past clients through e-mail newsletters or other promotional systems. For more advice about perfecting your portfolio, check out the *Resume & Portfolio* section in the *Career* category of HOWdesign.com.
- 5 DISORGANIZED PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS**
"Another great limitation for creatives across industries is the old-fashioned Rolodex," Belsky says. When contacts are organized, you can make better use of them as an extended network for tapping new resources and unearthing future opportunities.

Scott Belsky will be speaking at the HOW Design Conference in Boston, May 18–21, about making your creativity work for you. HOWconference.com

Although the Action Method consists of just three steps, it represents a significant shift in process for many creatives. With the Action Method as a foundation, we asked the Behance team to recommend more tips for implementing "Productive Creativity" into your daily practice. Here are eight ways to put your creative genius into action.

1. PREP THE ENVIRONMENT

Some tasks are destined to linger in limbo. Mailing invoices. Shipping packages. Make sure these banal—but essential—tasks get done by designating a spot on your desk or in your office as an "Action Area."

"At Behance, we used blue painter's tape to isolate a portion of a counter and a corner of the floor as ;i space reserved for items that require action," Belsky says. "The concept being that when you walk by, everything you see requires action. This is where letters to be mailed, packages to be sent and even snacks to be eaten would go/

Implementing Action Areas moves action steps from a conceptual line item on a to-do list to a physical space, which is harder to ignore. "Before we launched the Action Areas, packages and letters would sit on various desks and tables around the office," Belsky says. "With Action Areas, tasks that require action are getting more attention than ever before."

2. SOW THE SEEDS FOR PRODUCTIVITY

You have a finite amount of energy with which to juggle multiple projects and fuel endless creative ideas. Is it any wonder that projects slip through the cracks? Lack of focus combined with limited time and energy can sabotage your productivity. Prioriti/e projects to best channel your creative energy.

Belsky advocates creating what he calls an Energy Line, which is simply a horizontal line that starts with "idle" and goes up to "extreme" on a cork or dry-erase board. Write the names of all your projects on small cards and plot them along the line based on priority.

"The Energy Line is a simple mechanism to graphically display energy allocation," Belsky says. "Customize the system with words, colors and design that works for you and your Learn. Remember that beauty breeds loyalty when it comes to organization systems. At best, this device keeps you focused and serves as a constant reminder of how energy should be spent. At its worst, the Energy Line makes for great office art."

3. LET ACTIONS GROW FROM MEETINGS

Meetings may generate the greatest ideas and solutions, but they can also represent the biggest time suck in your schedule. "Ideally, meetings lead to realizations that result in action steps assigned to individuals with deadlines. Realistically," Belsky admits, "most meetings are fruitless." To make your meetings improve immediately and become more useful, he advises that creatives adopt a new

perspective about when and why to schedule a meeting. "Consider how costly it is to interrupt the workflow of each team member—literally stop all progress and consume all brainpower with one topic," he says.

Belsky deems weekly status meetings a waste. "A meeting to share updates can be done via e-mail or voicemail," he says. "Abolish 'Monday Meeting Syndrome.' Gathering people for no other reason than 'It's Monday' makes little to no sense."

Most important, conclude every meeting by reviewing the action items captured. "It takes less than 30 seconds per person, and it almost always reveals a few action steps that were missed," Belsky says. "The exercise also breeds a sense of accountability. If you state your action steps in front of your colleagues, you're likely to follow through."

4. PLANT ACTION REMINDERS

Prioritization is at the heart of productivity. And staying on task can be challenging. So Belsky suggests that you advertise action steps to yourself to help keep yourself on track. "When it

comes to self-discipline, you're your own personal Madison Avenue marketing agency," Belsky says. "You have some critical, time-intensive projects that require your energy and relentless focus. Your time is precious currency, and there are many other activities competing for your attention."

Designers are inherently visual—so communicate with yourself in the language you know best. "Design helps us organize thoughts and maintain a sense of order amid creative chaos," Belsky says. "However, design is also a valuable tool for managing—and controlling our own attention spans."

Behance suggests coordinating different colored Post-its with various actions, creating a multi-colored "Action Wall" of the various tasks you need to do. The different colors will help you sort tasks by category and keep it visually interesting. And invest in high-quality supplies. If you like the look and feel of your pens, folders, paper, you're more likely to use them.

Also, there's no room for subtlety when you promote action to yourself. Think big, bold and obvious as you advertise your action steps.



5. CULTIVATE DESPITE CONDITIONS

Despite what you may have heard (or experienced first-hand), creativity and bureaucracy aren't mutually exclusive. Even in bureaucratic environments, there's plenty of room for creativity to flourish. The secret is to hone your communication skills to make sure you've assembled the team necessary to see the idea through to the finish. "To make ideas happen, creative professionals must work in a system that values a bias-toward-action and collaboration without boundaries," Belsky says.

It just takes one person in the right position to quash an idea. Belsky advocates assembling everyone needed to make the idea happen from the get-go (be this metaphorically or physically). "If the plan for implementation involves designers, programmers, accountants and lawyers, then they should have representation at the brainstorm meeting," Belsky says.

6. WEED OUT TASKS

A common refrain of the creative professional is, "If it's urgent, I'm on it." And while it's valuable to be an effective problem-solver, excess attention to what may be wrongly perceived as "urgent" problems can jeopardize important long-term projects.

"Can we really let everything that is merely 'important' suffer at the mercy of urgent tasks?" Belsky asks. "Especially for those of us who have families or passions of the utmost importance—how can we protect them? If you let urgent matters consume your time, you'll never make progress on anything important."

It comes back to creating a clear list of priorities. "Some people narrow their list of important items to just five things," Belsky says. "Family is often one of the five, along with a few other specific projects or passions that require everyday attention."

It's essential to be specific about what does make the list—and ruthless about what doesn't. "When urgent matters come up, the 'important' stuff that didn't make the list should be dropped. You'll be surprised to see how much energy is spent on off-list items," Belsky says.

Another element of sticking to the important things is to learn to compartmentalize urgent matters as they arise. "As fearsome humans, we tend to dwell on problems and conflicts," Belsky says. "Dwelling on them takes time and distracts us from resolving the urgent items and from returning to the important stuff." Don't hoard urgent items—challenge yourself to delegate urgent matters to others.

And take advantage of what Belsky calls "windows of non-stimulation." "Late nights and early mornings are precious opportunities to make progress on important items with little risk of urgent matters popping up," he says.

7. SHARE IDEAS LIBERALLY

Your instinct may be to keep ideas to yourself for fear that others will steal them. But you've got more

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SCOTT BELSKY

to gain by sharing your ideas than you have to lose. For one thing, sharing ideas makes you accountable. "Many productive creative professionals and entrepreneurs claim that they became more committed to their ideas after telling people about them," Belsky explains. "Great ideas are plentiful, and very few people have the discipline and resources to make them happen."

This is also an opportunity to refine your ideas through criticism. "Great ideas don't develop in isolation," Belsky says. "You can become drunk on your own Kool-Aid without candid feedback from others. A critical component of pushing ideas forward is gathering feedback to refine the idea."

Last, engage a few partners to see the idea through. "The more people you work with, the more pressure you'll feel to provide further updates—and to have some progress to report," Belsky says.

8. ROOT YOURSELF IN PROGRESS

There's no better way to conclude this list of tips than with one that validates a job well done. Belsky encourages you to surround yourself with the artifacts of your progress. "The inspiration to brainstorm comes easily, but the inspiration to take action is rare," Belsky says. "Why not decorate your workspace with completed action steps? While we tend to surround ourselves with art and imagery that serves to inspire us in our work, is it more inspiration that we need? Most creative professionals report that they aren't short of ideas but rather the discipline and organization to make them happen. For this reason, consider surrounding yourself with testaments to taking action."

So don't throw away those completed to-do lists. Tack them up as evidence of your hard work and productivity. After all, you did just see some of your creative ideas through to fruition. ■■■

Lisa Hazen is a Chicago-based writer and web designer who is working much more efficiently after researching and writing this story. lisahazen.com

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