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## THE HOME ECONOMIST: How to combat creative resistance

Sure, the boss says ‘think outside of the box,’ but when it comes to actually listening to new ideas, we’re all a little uncomfortable.

**Brett Graff**, [www.TheHomeEconomist.com](http://www.TheHomeEconomist.com)

This week, Miami-based retailer Edward Beiner Purveyors of Fine Eyewear launched a new and novel ad campaign for its sunglasses. Rather than following the industry standard of brand-driven advertising — placing designer shades on beautiful people and slapping a high-end logo such as “Prada” just below the models — Edward Beiner is emphasizing the digital technology of its prescription lenses.

When advertising executive William Berenson first introduced the idea of highlighting what customers will see — not how they’ll look — he was greeted with enormous resistance from company officials. And it wasn’t until he persistently created a series of mock-up ads that the decision-makers got behind his concept.

“When you’re in an industry that sells luxury items and passion and beauty, there’s the thought, ‘We have to do what everyone else is doing,’” says Berenson, CEO of Just South of Madison, a Miami-based advertising company. “But if you’re doing the same stuff you’re not going to get noticed.”

The thing about creativity is that companies everywhere claim it’s valuable. And while most executives would say they’d happily compensate innovative thinkers with handsome amounts of money, some scientists say they’ve proved the risks associated with originality actually make us pretty uncomfortable. And that creates a bias against the exact same innovation everyone says they’re seeking. Still, just as Edward Beiner jumped on board with Berenson, business experts tell us we can get bosses, investors and clients to appreciate our out-of-the-box ideas by incorporating a few key points that prove we’ll boost the company’s bottom line. And perhaps afterward, our ideas will do the same for our own bank accounts.

“Managers authentically want creativity and people authentically cherish it,” says Jennifer Mueller, an assistant professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. “But if you want to accept a creative idea, then you’ll have to come to terms with the idea that you don’t know with any degree of certainty that it will work. People often reject creative ideas is because they want to diminish uncertainty.”

Mueller studied this phenomenon after continuously listening to frustrated product developers whose concepts had been overlooked. She in turn devised experiments that paired creative words such as “novel” and “inventive” with both a positive word, such as “heaven” or “love,” and then separately with a negative word, such as “vomit” or “rot.” She found her subjects — who beforehand readily agreed to appreciating creativity — more rapidly agreed with the negative associations than they did with the positive pairings.



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“We think of things in terms of categories and we have associations with these categories,” says Mueller. “It’s like stereotyping. We can associate women with warmth but that doesn’t mean it’s true — creativity is the same. It makes people feel uncertain.”

Eliminate doubt in your initiatives by making sure your presentation answers the questions that will be on the minds of the decision-makers, says Tom Steenburgh, an associate professor at Harvard Business School. They’ll want to know: 1) Whether there is a burning need for your product or service. 2) How your idea will meet that need. 3) The reasons you’re the person to carry out the task. Start it all off, says Steenburgh, by asking your audience a question or presenting them with a puzzle.

“Grab their imagination,” he says. “It’s like when you go to the theater and the curtain goes up, you’re ready for anything. Your audience is there with you. Open up the world of possibilities.”

You’ll also want to include in your presentation some cold, hard numbers, says John Layzell, a small business consultant in South Florida. Consider calculating the cost, potential returns or even some sales projections, he says.

“If you have a creative person pitching to a logical person it’s almost as if they’re speaking a different language,” says Layzell. “You have to pitch so it makes sense to them.”

Michael Caputi, CEO of Hollywood-based Epoxytec, which protects materials against erosion, knows the feeling. After watching a documentary on Ford Motor Co., he developed an idea designed to increase his company’s revenues that involved dedicating some office space as a place to track and color code each sale from beginning to end. He figured by dissecting each transaction, the company could look for trouble points and label them as “red,” alerting the appropriate personal, who could then focus on making improvements. But his concept meant setting aside a portion of the warehouse, which then couldn’t be used for storage. What’s more, his partners would have to manage sales differently. That’s why it took an entire business quarter — and eventually figures involving year-end revenue targets — to persuade the other executives.

“It all comes down to results,” Caputi says.

*This is a monthly column by Miamian Brett Graff, a former U.S. government economist who writes about how economic forces are affecting real people.*

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