



## CREATIVITY TECHNIQUES IN MARKETING – MANAGERS’ EXPERTISE COMPARED TO ITS PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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One of the factors determining employees’ creativity is their expertise and skills in a given field, including familiarity with creativity techniques. This paper aims to establish the degree to which creativity techniques are used for marketing problem-solving by managers who have the relevant expertise gained as part of creativity training included in the curriculum of their MBA studies. It was assumed that their expertise and skills related to creativity techniques would stimulate a more frequent use thereof, as well as inspire greater interest in marketing creativity and the assessment of the effects of creative work as compared to managers who had not been trained in this respect.

**Keywords:** Creativity, Creativity techniques in marketing, Creativity assessment.

### Introduction

Cost-cutting and management process streamlining are not sufficient to ensure that the competitiveness of an enterprise is maintained in the long term. Rapidly changing markets and increasingly complex problems enterprises face nowadays, coupled with the tightening market and ever greater product similarity, make creativity and innovation fundamental factors in building a competitive advantage. Over 80% of Polish small and medium-sized enterprises believe creativity to be a vital contributor to business development, with 90% acknowledging large and very large potential of its use in marketing (Jerzyk, 2007).

Creativity is considered the preliminary stage of innovation; it is a process of generating ideas, solutions to problems and new projects, without the implementation phase. Creativity is triggered by the subject, i.e. an individual employee or a team of people co-operating with one another. One of the conditions for an individual’s or a team’s creativity is expertise and experience in a given field, which is deemed by researchers to be a critical condition, but not a sine qua non of the creative process. Expertise, on the one hand, supports creativity, while on the other it may restrict it and give rise to conformist attitudes. A number of studies attempted to evaluate the significance of expertise related to a given field, sector or business process, there is, however, a shortage of research concerning the role knowledge of creativity techniques and the ability to manage creativity play in encouraging creativity in enterprises. The growing availability of training sessions on creativity does not correspond to a proportional increase in knowledge about their effectiveness. This paper aims to establish the significance of expertise related to creativity management and creativity techniques as compared to its practical application. This paper outlines the findings of a study regarding the familiarity with and use of creative problem-solving techniques conducted among a group of marketing managers who followed a creativity course as part of their MBA programme (the study was carried out six months after course completion). The findings were

compared with a study of a group of managers who had never attended such a course. The study attempted to establish whether familiarity with creativity techniques translates into their use in practice and whether knowledge of conditions that need to be met in order for an enterprise to be creative in fact encourages businesses to introduce mechanisms that stimulate creativity.

## **Literature Review**

Even though creativity accompanied man from the earliest times, the notion itself proves immensely difficult to define. At first, creativity was considered solely a divine attribute of God, who was the only one to hold creative powers (nihilism). It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that this idea was modified, in that the term “creative” began to be used also with reference to the representatives of the world of fine arts, who were talented and sported outstanding accomplishments, thus making them an elite among the society at large. The egalitarian approach to creativity, which, as some believe, was due to the necessity to include everyone in order to enable researchers to gain access to research subjects, dates back only as far as the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Creativity as an egalitarian trait, available to all humankind, encompassed all human actions that went beyond imitation (Szmidt, 2001; Bernacka 2004). The creativity concepts listed above, i.e. nihilism, elitism and egalitarianism, despite evolving over the years, remain valid till this day. Research findings have shown that managers are convinced of the lack of creativity among some of their subordinates and natural aptitude for creativity in others. Moreover, they openly question the possibility of teaching some of their staff creativity (Jerzyk, Leszczyński and Mruk, 2004).

According to Stein, creativity is a process that results in novelty which is accepted as useful, tenable, or satisfying by a significant group of others (or, to put it slightly differently, by competent persons in a given field) at some point in time (Amabile, 1983; Runco, 2004, Nęcka, 2001). Creativity may also be analysed from the viewpoint of 4P: Person (employee or team), Product (the result of creative work), Press (environment), Process (act of creativity), which may be considered the basis for creativity management in marketing.

Assuming as the starting point for discussion the most general statement that the role of marketing is to create and deliver value for the customers, we should ponder how to effectively search for new and valuable products and services, original ideas for marketing activities or innovative ways of communicating with the market. It cannot be denied that marketing is most interested in the product of the creative process, which will solve difficult problems in a way that is mutually satisfying for both the customers and the company. Nevertheless, on the way to generating a creative solution it is worth analysing the conditions which either stimulate or block marketing staff creativity (Amabile, 1996), the tools and processes leading to novel and valuable ideas and the role of the employees themselves, their qualities, skills and experience.

To illustrate creativity in marketing two approaches are generally used (Kilgour, Koslow, 2009), transferred from the organisation level. The first focuses on the role of the social environment in encouraging creativity (Amabile, 1996; West, 2000; Ekvall, 1997, Isaksen, Lauder, Ekvall, 1999). In this approach factors related to the internal business environment are analysed, referred to as a creative climate or creative atmosphere, which, when present, encourage creativity among staff. The second approach looks at creativity from the perspective of creative thinking techniques, which aid problem-solving and original ideas (de Bono, 2008; Proctor, 2002).

The adoption of the first approach entails the costs of establishing an environment conducive to creativity with uncertainty as to whether the expected results can be achieved within a short time frame. Furthermore, the activities aimed at encouraging a creative climate should be introduced from the perspective of the entire organisation, rather than just the marketing department. Another important limitation is the lack of an established set of conditions that stimulate creativity. It is impossible to unequivocally determine whether a given factor contributes to creativity, whereas another hinders it and whether certain conditions may be offset by others (for instance, if time pressure is a problem in the marketing department, can it be minimised using a different factor, e.g. a charismatic leader).

Furthermore, the conditions aimed at fostering employee creativity should be fitted to the specific nature of the organisational culture, business sector or market in which a given enterprise operates.

In the second approach the only requirement is the cost of teaching employees the use of creativity techniques. Consequently it could be assumed that the benefits would result in a more frequent application of creative techniques in marketing practice. Creativity techniques can be defined as individual work tools or team work instruments that serve a specific purpose. The scope of application is wide – they can be used both for improving and developing creative skills in individuals and teams, therefore for teaching purposes, but also for specific problem solving. The potential scope of application of the majority of creative techniques becomes even wider when the instructions are no longer taken literally and slight deviations from their wording are permitted (Nęcka, Orzechowski et al., 2005). The set of creative techniques, apart from their universal application, is also characterised by substantial volume and variety of names used, which may at times lead to problems with clarity and classification. Many creative techniques use different stimuli and incentives in order to compensate for the limitations posed by the existing experience and habits of marketing professionals, which are reported to reduce the possibility of coming up with novel and creative ideas in as much as 80% (Hender, Dean et al., 2002). The techniques foster and develop mainly divergent thinking that gives rise to new and original solutions, while techniques aimed at convergent (evaluative, analytical) thinking are limited in number. Assuming the creativity process to be iterative and composed of a repetitive divergence and convergence sequence, the techniques can be applied at any stage of the creative process and adapted to different user needs.

Familiarity with creative problem-solving techniques is equivalent to specific knowledge that shapes creative thinking (Amabile, 1983; Simon, 1989). Although most researchers focus on the significance of general knowledge about the market, competitors, buyer behaviour and the role it plays in fostering employee creativity, it is also the ability to use creative techniques, familiarity with them and awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the ability to match the right creative technique to a given problem that could prove to be a substantial factor determining creativity in marketing. A number of studies attempted to establish the importance of expertise in a given field or scope of issues, but familiarity with creative techniques as a factor encouraging creativity has not yet been investigated. The findings of research by Marsh et al. (1999) indicate that individuals having certain expertise tend to use it even when recommended not to. This would suggest that knowledge of creative techniques might translate automatically into their application in problem solving, thus increasing the chances of arriving at novel and original solutions.

However, familiarity with techniques may result in conformity and the tendency to rely on previous experience and use only selected creative techniques that the manager has been successful with before. Constant use of the same techniques leads to schematic and conventional thinking, which is highly risky in the area of marketing. It makes the managers lose sight of the essence of creative techniques that are meant to encourage the search for creative solutions, but instead become a fossilised format that stifles the creativity of the individual and the team alike.

The techniques may be used in marketing in a variety of social configurations – an individual working on their own, a team of employees, a coalition – which can all affect the quantity (number of ideas) and quality of the results achieved. Most people are convinced of the positive impact teamwork exerts on creative problem solving. However, research findings in this respect are far from unequivocal (Diehl and Stroebe, 1991; Thompson, 2003). Team work is accused of generating social idleness and conformity, as well as causing conflicts (Robbins, Judge, 2012). On the other hand, a team holds interdisciplinary knowledge and skills that are essential for solving difficult and complex problems.

Creativity techniques are also investigated from the viewpoint of their effectiveness and leadership style (transactional, transformative) (Herrmann and Felfe, 2012). Technique effectiveness is measured in terms of quality and quantity of the results achieved, their novelty and feasibility. Consequently, it is vital to hire leaders that are capable of harnessing the right techniques depending on what is required.

## **Research Purpose**

According to Amabile (Luecke, 2005) employee creativity involves three components: expertise, creative thinking skills and motivation. The term expertise encompasses intellect, familiarity with technical processes, education and work experience gained so far. In turn, creative thinking skills translate into the awareness of being creative, flexible work style and, finally, familiarity with creative thinking techniques.

In case of the first two components of creativity, i.e. expertise and creative thinking skills, the decisive role is played by the education system and professional training, creative thinking skills and familiarity with creative problem-solving techniques. In this context creativity education, especially when it comes to present and future marketing managers, is of paramount importance. There is demand for employees who do not offer expertise and experience alone, but are also capable of developing innovative ideas, out-of-the-box solutions and unique strategies. Creative employees are a valuable asset for a business, which may affect the company's competitive position. It was assumed that the knowledge of creativity techniques among marketing managers available to them through training sessions would translate into their more frequent application and greater effectiveness. Moreover, it would contribute to more effective management of marketing staff creativity. In order to assess the impact of familiarity with creativity techniques and creativity management, a study was conducted among managers who, over the past year, attended creativity training as part of their MBA programme. The findings were compared to the opinions of managers who had never attended such a training course. The creativity course discussed the essence of creativity, conditions for creativity and creativity assessment at the level of individuals, teams and organisations, creativity management in business and selected (18) creativity techniques.

## **Creativity Expertise and Familiarity with Creativity Techniques Among Marketing Managers**

### **Research Methodology**

The main aim of the study was to determine whether a marketing manager's expertise in the area of creativity affects the significance attributed to creativity in an enterprise, the degree to which creativity techniques are applied and the ability to manage this area of a company's operations. The respondents (n=48) included individuals who attended a course on creativity in business as part of their MBA programme and expressed the wish to participate in such study. The study was conducted on a group of 48 respondents, 23 female and 25 male, using an online questionnaire, approximately one year following the completion of the creativity course. The questions posed concerned the following issues:

- the importance of creativity in the company,
- the degree to which the company is creativity-oriented,
- assessment of one's own creativity and the creativity of one's subordinates and superior,
- familiarity with creativity techniques and their practical application,
- ways of and conditions for encouraging creativity.

The respondents' age ranged from 25 to 53, with the average age of 34. The length of service of the respondents ranged from 1 year to 28 years (with the average of 9.5 years). The average level of employment in companies where the respondents worked stood at 2004 employees, whereas with respect to the number of marketing department staff the average employment amounted to 26 employees. The companies represented by the respondents operated on the market for the average of 40 years.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The managers questioned attached large and very large importance to the creativity factor in the industry sector in which their company operated, while, simultaneously, assigning a rather low rating to their

subordinates' creativity. On a scale of 5 to 1, where 1 meant definitely very high, whereas 5 definitely very low, the subjects rated their own creativity potential at the average of 3.53 points, with their superiors' rating at 3.19 and the subordinates' rating at 3.14. It turned out that the more expertise related to creativity the subjects had, the more critical they became of both themselves and other employees. A similar study conducted among managers who declared that they had never before attended a creativity course, showed that the rating of the creativity potential was more favourable, with own potential rated at 5.07, subordinates at 3.70 and superiors at 4.20.

The subjects were also rather negative about the way their company strives to harness employee creativity, pointing out the following problems: insufficient incentives and encouragement, poor system of eliciting employee ideas and lack of clear policies aimed at motivating employees and rewarding creativity.

An interesting issue in the subject matter of the study was the managers' expertise in the area of creativity techniques. All subjects declared that they were familiar with creativity techniques (i.e. the ones taught at the creativity course). However, their knowledge of techniques did not translate in any significant way into their day-to-day use. When asked about the scope in which the relevant techniques are used, the subjects named, in the order of frequency: brainstorming (83.3%), mapping (35.4), analogies (27.1%) and disruption (10.4%) (Dru, 2002; Jerzyk, Leszczyński, Mruk, 2004). At the same time, one in three subjects declared the use of their own individual methods to spur the creative process. These individual methods were developed based on experience, expertise, self-awareness and recognition of employee potential, as well as the knowledge gained in the course of training. Furthermore, the subjects emphasized that the method used is not a fixed tool of stimulating creativity, but rather undergoes continuous modifications required by the circumstances that call for creativity, the time available and the individual employees that participate in the creative work. Stimulating the creative process by using creative thinking techniques is not always possible, according to the respondents, due to the interdisciplinary nature of problems and time pressure to complete the task. Furthermore, the subjects most frequently opted for the techniques familiar to their subordinates, which guaranteed feasible results. They stressed that they select "safe" creativity techniques due to their experience in using them, predictability of effects and fear that other (provocative) techniques may not yield a solution to a problem within the prescribed time limit, not to mention requiring greater organisational efforts on the part of the manager.

In a similar study conducted among "untrained" managers, less than half of the respondents (46.0%) declared familiarity with any creativity technique, not necessarily being able to name it. The group that listed creativity techniques known to them, named, among others, brainstorming – 81% of the subjects said they were familiar with the principles of using it. Other sporadically named techniques included lateral thinking, the Delphi method and the six thinking hats.

The managers who attended a creativity course demonstrated great concern for the planning of their team's creative work, with a particular focus on the selection of members for the creative team, fostering an informal working atmosphere and carefully choosing the place and time for creative work.

The study also investigated the relationship between the managers' creative technique expertise and other skills. The analysis of the correlation between familiarity with creative techniques, the ability to encourage employee creativity and creativity management skills (i.e. fostering creative atmosphere and conducting creativity assessment) did not demonstrate any strong links (see Table 1). It turned out that there is a strong correlation between self-assessment of the creative potential and the ability to encourage creativity and the creativity management skills, while negative, but weak, correlation was noted in the case of self-assessment and familiarity with creative techniques and the ability to encourage creativity.

Familiarity with techniques is important, but it is only the starting point for the realisation that managers need to make greater effort when organising employees' creative work (in terms of team work planning, selection of participants, preparing the venue, setting the time, etc.). In many informal conversations experienced marketing managers with the required creativity expertise and skills indicated that traditional creativity techniques used in team work, such as brainstorming, and in particular targeted brainstorming, were only a springboard for the manager's individual creativity. This is because the

manager is expected to deliver creative solutions, rather than just skilfully manage a creative team. The results of creative team work can be used to spur one's own creativity, often equated with assessment and decision-making process, i.e. selecting the best solution. Such an approach suggests substantial impact of the management style (e.g. transactional) on the role of and the manner in which creative techniques are used. It should be noted that the subjects voiced greater concern with assessing the solutions generated by the techniques used than with the process of generating solutions itself.

**Table 1.** Spearman rho correlation between self-assessment of the creative potential, ability to encourage employee creativity, familiarity with techniques and creativity management skills.

Item	Creativity self-assessment	Ability to encourage employee creativity	Familiarity with creative thinking techniques	Creativity management skills
Creativity self-assessment	1.000	0.333**	-0.112	0.188*
Ability to encourage employee creativity	0.333**	1.000	-0.164*	0.333**
Familiarity with creative thinking techniques	-0.112	-0.164*	1.000	0.011
Creativity management skills	0.188*	0.333**	0.011	1.000

Source: Questionnaire study

In order to ensure effective use of creativity techniques in marketing, managers need to be able to evaluate the ideas and solutions yielded by creative thinking, as well as the employees who provide them. On the one hand there is the need to obtain novel ideas and to seek solutions to problems that are difficult to resolve using the existing experience and expertise, while on the other there is a shortage of skills to assess the processes and results of employee creativity.

The study findings indicate that managers lack clear criteria for creativity assessment and, what is more, they often neglect creativity assessment in favour of acknowledging innovation. Few managers use any criteria for assessing marketing creativity, with most of them focused on hard, measurable results, such as sales figures, number of new customers, accomplishment of image goals, which are only to a slight extent suited to assessing creativity in the area of marketing, but rather aid the overall comprehensive evaluation of marketing activities and the effectiveness of employees. The assessment criteria for evaluating creativity in marketing include the following category: *informal, arbitrary, taking into consideration the employee's overall performance*. The managers questioned indicated the need to use such difficult to quantify and often highly subjective criteria due to the shortage of other metrics. However, there was clearly the need to place a value on creativity in marketing, put in such words as ingenuity, initiative, innovation or entrepreneurial spirit. Marketing managers are aware of the need to acknowledge employee creativity that does not necessarily translate directly into sales figures, market position or brand recognition. Such awareness seems to be greater in the case of managers who attended creativity training than in the case of untrained managers.

Based on the managers' opinions it can be concluded that measuring marketing creativity is problematic, as it concerns both the intangible object (a creative idea understood as the result of a creative process), which does not lend itself to evaluation by measurable criteria, as well as the subject (the employee). A given creative product (thought, idea, concept) may be assessed in various ways that take into account its specific nature – different criteria will be used to assess the concept of a new product

(sales forecasts, predicted market share) and others to judge a PR concept or loyalty schemes (idea originality, coherence with marketing objectives). In any case, however, we face high likelihood of mistake, since the result of creativity under assessment does not present the entire catalogue of features that are introduced later at the innovation stage.

According to the managers, the criteria that could be used to assess marketing solutions and ideas generated through creative techniques include: originality and novelty, communicativeness (i.e. the way the concept is presented and the manner in which support for the concept is gathered), value of the idea for the customers and the company, idea feasibility. As can be seen, the key criterion comprises originality and novelty, thus a qualitative assessment of the result of the creative process. This criterion is usually deemed of primary importance when determining what is and what is not creative. In its general use it seems quite straightforward, however, in the area of marketing activities establishing originality and novelty of an idea is far from easy. Furthermore, there is a risk that the most original and novel solutions might be rejected for this reason alone.

The result of the creative process is assessed through its communicativeness and comprehensibility, which determine its approval and support by decision-makers. It might be expected that communicativeness is rather a skill possessed by the employee who generated the idea and not the idea itself. The way the creative concept is presented to and comprehended and approved by the decision-makers will be reflected in the rating given to the idea. The first criterion discussed above is followed closely by the criterion of value to the customers and the company. There is a relationship between this creativity criterion and innovation assessment. It seems therefore that the respondents are willing to use the selected aspects of innovation assessment to put a value on creativity, although that may not be possible at all times. Significant attention is paid to the feasibility of ideas generated by the creative process. The respondents omitted in their rating a high number of solutions yielded, indicating rather that it could often be a weakness and not a strength of a given creativity technique.

In conclusion it should be stated that creativity is a valuable skill in today's competitive economy. The effects of creative thinking are increasingly valued by companies, which acknowledge their necessity and perceive them as a significant opportunity for growth. Marketing is the area most interested in creativity, as attracting new customers, offering unique products or services or conducting efficient marketing communication with customers require creative intervention.

The findings of studies carried out in Poland fit in perfectly with the international debate among creativity researchers concerning encouraging employee creativity, dating back to the 1990s. A large number of studies indicate a substantial role played by expertise, including familiarity with creativity techniques, as a factor determining creativity. Based on the arguments yielded by the existing research it can be concluded that individual creativity may be boosted by acquiring and expanding one's expertise with respect to creativity techniques, but also by effective team work management and creativity assessment skills. An important factor influencing greater interest in the use of creativity techniques is management style and the mental attitude managers have towards creativity.

Literature, especially in the realm of psychology of creativity, provides a wide array of criteria for creativity assessment, not all of which may be used in business practice. However, for creativity to find a more widespread use in business, certain assessment criteria need to be adopted in order to enable creativity management, coupled with the introduction of incentives encouraging creative thinking in employees. This will certainly be aided by establishing clearly the areas that should undergo assessment. From the economic perspective it is useful to evaluate the employees' level of creativity and the creativity of the results (a novel idea or solution). Creativity assessment criteria could include originality and novelty, feasibility and communicativeness, as well as characteristics related to the employee's skills and effort. It needs to be noted that the ability to assess the results of the creative process is more important in the application of creativity by marketing managers than their knowledge of creativity techniques alone.

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