



Stanford eCorner

Case Study: Increasing the Bone Marrow Registry

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One lesson taught by Stanford GSB Professor Jennifer Aaker is to include the opposite of every idea proposed in a brainstorming session. This tool vastly expands the number ideas, both excellent and terrible in equal proportion. This thinking led one former student to launch a social media campaign to register 20,000 South Asian bone marrow donors to find a match for a friend with leukemia. The result not only increased disease awareness and found a donor, but it also provided an excellent example of successful social networking, factoring in the strength of a specific goal, the power of reversing the rules, the necessity of creating a campaign that allows for no-fuss collaboration, and the need to tell a good story.



Transcript

It all changed for me two and a half years ago, right before I met Tina. I was actually at Berkeley teaching a creativity and innovation course. This is the same one that you teach, right? It's crazy. And what I learned over the course of now 15 years of teaching is that no one remembers my lectures. And I have empirical data to support the fact that people don't remember my content. I email my students one to two years after my classes and I say, "What do you remember from my classes?" and they'll email me back and say, "Nothing." "You're a very nice person, and I remember enjoying your classes. They were great. Don't remember anything." And then I go, "Really? Honestly? Nothing?" And they'll say, "Oh, I remember. You made us turn on your cell phones and then work it in the learning into the phone conversation' when people would embarrassingly leave on their cell phones." If you think you're embarrassed now, you should see how embarrassed my students get when I make them pick up the cell phone. It's horrible.

Or, "Oh, I remember chickens don't have lenses and you taught a case that said chickens do have lenses. Who knew that chicken and--" this ridiculous, innocuous stuff. And so during this class, I said, "Instead of me trying to think what should you remember from my class, let me crowd-source this and say, 'What do you remember from my class?'" And most people sent me one or two bullets. Robert Chatwani sent me a PowerPoint deck, and I just wanted to share with you the deck. One of the basic premises of the course is this idea of reversing the rules. So if you are in a brainstorming session and you guys all brainstorm an idea, what you'll get is a bell-shaped curve of ideas, right? So some of them are really crappy, some of them are really good, and most of them are mediocre. And if you simply reverse the rules, take every idea that's populated out in the brainstorm session and just reverse it--so let's say you're doing a brainstorm for Coke, and someone says, "Let's come up with a giant red Coke can," and you say, "Let's make it blue and shrink it." You just take every idea and you literally just reverse it without even thinking. What ends up happening is now you've expanded the bell-shaped curve. Now you have a whole lot of really crappy, crappy ideas, a lot of bad, bad ideas, but so do you have a lot more excellent ideas. And if the idea of brainstorming is to defer judgment and slice off at a later point in time excellent ideas, now you've got a larger sample size of excellent ideas.

And he took this and he thought about how it integrated into his life. Before my class, his best friend, Sameer, was diagnosed with leukemia. Sameer, a Stanford undergraduate, started Dosti project here--for those of you who know Dosti, a social entrepreneurship-minded club here--and brilliant. He was, I believe an engineer here studying at Stanford, went on to all these start-ups, Monkey Bin and others, and then he found someone he loved and he married. Her name, Reena. She's right there. And he was diagnosed with leukemia about six months or so before my class in 2007. When they found out that Sameer was diagnosed with leukemia, they reached around just to figure out what they could do, and they found out a friend of a friend of theirs, Vinay, was also diagnosed with leukemia. So he was in East Bay, a bright individual who was a Boston doctor at the time, also incredibly young. And this is the PowerPoint deck that Robert shared with me, and I'm just going to go through it silently with you.

This is Sameer on the lower left and that's Vinay on the upper left. They built two essential organizations. If you're going to reverse the rules and not find this to be an acceptable situation, instead say, we're going to treat this like any organizational endeavor. One single goal, 20,000 individuals, and we'll run that instead of a revenue model. With that being the goal, we'll have 20,000 individuals. They had Team Vinay and Sameer. They had marketing leads, they had operation leads, education, they had local leads, not dissimilar to the Obama campaign. They built out instant brands. And they didn't have the luxury that many of us do. What is our brand and how are we going to distribute it? They had to put these up immediately and it was so clear what the call to action on these websites were.

And they executed like crazy. Every single link here is live. It's a strategy that they created. So if you hear this story and you want to act and you feel like you could but you don't know how to make a video, you go over here and you click on "How do you make a video?" and you have a dummy's guide to video creation. Or let's say you work at Cisco and you want to be able to run a drive in Cisco this Friday, but it seems hard and painful and you don't even know where to start. Well, you go click on the "Donor Drives" and you find out the dummy's guide to holding a donor's drive. And everything here is cut and paste. So you replace the text in red and now you have your letter to John Chambers. "Dean John Chambers, I want to run a drive this Friday. This is what I need to do." Cut, paste, send.

"Thank you, John Chambers. We ran a drive last Friday. This is how many people we got. This is what we need to do next." Yes, cut, paste, send. 'Social change in a box'. The ability to provide tools and templates for anyone who wants to act, making it abundantly clear and easy and even fun to be able to act. People made widgets. People that never even knew Sameer and Vinay made widgets. People made videos of Indian celebrities that heard this story that wanted to do something with video, a clear call for action in funny and humorous ways. Oftentimes they'll pop them up on YouTube.

The results? This is the United States. Four hundred fifty people were emailed the single email from Robert, and it went out to all of these people who ended up forwarding that email on. And all of these are bone marrow drives that happened in 11 short weeks. Four hundred seventy of them sprang up. 24,611 individuals registered in the bone marrow registry in 11 short weeks. A perfect match for Sameer was found in that time. Vinay had a good match. And Sameer shared his story from the hospital. And he blogged prolifically: he felt so lucky he found his match, how to live life to the fullest, and he talked about happiness. He talked about happiness both in terms of excitement but also in terms of meaning and great fullness and connectedness and being a part of something bigger.

And he showed his bone marrow transplant on YouTube so that anyone in the future who is scared of what a bone marrow transplant might actually look like could go and see on YouTube what does it look like. And the lessons they learned were fundamental. The power of a clear, specific, simple goal. The power of the ability to reverse the rules, and instead of what I would have done, which is kind of, "Can I bring you a lasagna? Can I take care of your kids?" or something like that, they said, "No, we're running this like a corporation. We're going to get 20,000 individuals in the bone marrow registry telling a good and truthful story." The power of stories is what makes people act. Even well-argued arguments are not nearly as persuasive. And the opportunity to design for collaboration, enabling others to take on this goal--Robert and Sameer's friends and family couldn't have gotten 24,611 individuals in the bone marrow registry themselves. You have to design campaigns so your single-focused goals connect it to the story which resounds and resonates with others that hear this.