

Bryan Mattimore

Insights from running 1,000+ brainstorming sessions

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

Bryan Mattimore

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the innovation and creativity summit 2017 I m very happy today to have Bryan Mattimore with us, Bryan is the founder of the growth engine an innovation agency and the author of several books on creativity and innovation including his latest 21 days to a big idea and Ryan its lovely to have you.

Ryan Mattimore: Thank you Nick thanks for having me

Nick Skillicorn: So for people who aren't aware of the growth engine and the work that you do, can you give us a bring background as to how you started innovation and what the agency does

Ryan Mattimore: Well yea growth engine as an innovation agency , we help companies come up with new stuff, I mean that's the simple way to talk about it and that could be the obvious thing like new products and services but it's also potentially new business models, new marketing strategies, new activation ideas to call, that could be promotion PR even advertising concepts and as an innovation agency we work with not only with the client but we work with their agencies, could be other agencies and certainly also a packaging agency etcetera. So we bring new methodologies whether they are ideation or brainstorming processes as well as creative research methodologies, ethnographies, one on one focus groups etcetera to make sure we are getting close to the consumer and the customer and ultimately hopefully to achieve high success rates for our clients.

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely and then have been doing innovation before you started the agency or what was it that attracted you to the concept of innovation and creativity

Bryan Mattimore: Well the agency is now 17 years old, it was co founded with Gary Fraser who was named market of the year by bran week for the work he did , I meant him then when he was in Unilever before then I spent a long time doing ideation sessions and so I have done over a thousand ideation sessions and that was in a company called the maddewar group, so I did that for 15years before we formed growth engine and at one point we were doing over hundred of this ideation sessions a year and that was again on new products but it also could have been on creative cost cutting or certainly new strategies etcetera.

Nick Skillicorn: and I mean more than a thousand brainstorming sessions ideation sessions. I don't think I have met anyone who has done that many and I am sure you have got some insights from

your experience that they can run quite differently based on the teams involved and what you are hoping to achieve, is that right

Ryan Mattimore: That's absolutely correct and I always say that if you are not bringing methodologies to the process, one of our clients was Oreo cookies and they have been around for a hundred years and so to get people to be thinking really differently, we spend a lot of time framing the challenge, making sure we are solving the right challenge and secondly using a variety of different ideation techniques and part of our expertise is frankly knowing which technique will work best against a different kind of challenge and then the third thing is we spent a great deal of time customizing those techniques.. so in the case of we were trying to invent a new dairy beverage not too long ago, well in that case we did research on sort of old beverages that were available and we did that research through a data base of menus offered by the New York quick library, they have 80000 menus in this data base that you can get online and we use those to help generate stimuli to trigger new ideas from the people in the ideation session

Nick Skillicorn: What if you found across the order of a thousand plus session, what if you kept track of these in any way to see what works, what doesn't.

Ryan Mattimore: Well we have, we haven't done a formal study of it but we know for instance if there's a technique called worst idea technique where you come up with not good ideas but bad ideas and then you either do the opposite of that idea or say as bad as it is, is there something that I can use to turn into a good idea. we know that technique for instance, it's fun and it quote always works so that's more of a general technique but we also know having worked at some of the data, the results of our ideation sessions but that one tends to not as productive from a purely quantity standpoint so you don't get as many ideas as you might from a technique we invented called triggered brain walking but the quality of those ideas, the number that make if you will the final cut is very high so if we do all day new product ideation session , we might generate 200 ideas in a day about ten percent of those are probably really exciting ideas and so if you take those twenty the worst idea may have four to five that might have come from the worst idea technique. Semantic intuition is another technique that is extremely productive in terms of new products but I answer your question, we know that a certain techniques work for different kinds of challenges and how productive they will be in generally and finally kind of when to use them, that's another part of this work is choreography the techniques, because that's another part of this because you know at three o'clock people are brain dead and so you need a high energy technique to keep them thinking and going

Nick Skillicorn: Is there also a difference in the sort of techniques of the outcome you want, so you mentioned you do work with advertising, new product development, new strategy, in my experience those all have actually different types of ideas and long terms versus short term views

Bryan Mattimore: You are absolutely correct, so if we are doing strategy work and we do a lot of that now, that could be for new business models certainly new launch strategies, if you will white spaces as it is called right looking for areas of opportunities, we will use for instance sort of techniques in the questioning areas, questioning assumptions is a certain theory or technique when we would use when we are doing strategy work, a problem redefinition is another technique we use, 20 questions is another technique we use, by the way for your listeners, we have identified if you will have four categories of ideation techniques, there is sort of questionings techniques which are

great for strategy, the metaphorical techniques which are great for promotional and add generation ideas headliner etcetera, there are techniques around visuals and those are great for generating insights with customers and consumers and then finally they are sort of catch all category and that's sort of a role play and fantasy and wishing and those kind of things. And all of these different techniques have different uses for different business challenges.

Nick Skillicorn: Now one thing that a lot of companies struggle with is actually getting results after the brain storming sessions are finished. I know for example a lot of facilitators who I am not that keen on will look at a well covered and posted note saying we have created a thousand ideas today, that's proof that it works, can I have my check please, so what counts as success and what counts as pack of appearance of success

Bryan Mattimore: That is such a great question, I thank you for asking it, two things we practice what we call focused ideation, that's an oxymoronic term, yes it is, the idea is though we want to get ideas that quote are aligned with the business challenge or they are strategically viable ideas because otherwise why are you doing it. We spend a lot of time quote framing with the session, that's number one and customizing that technique to make sure we are getting ideas that are strategically aligned with all sort of surprising and different, that's the paradox or that's the creative tension that we are trying to resolve and the work we do but to a point we facilitate much deeper than broader. So in other words we don't want a thousand ideas, we want 150 to 200 if we are doing a day long ideation because we are going to push an idea and you know to say yeah well we will put minerals in this new drink, that's not an idea yet. You have to figure out possibly the name of the positioning, how is it truly unique, what's the consumer's benefit, all that kinds of stuff maybe even packaging ideas, how is it delivered, does it have a different form, those are all the elements that go into if we are talking about new products that you know what's the price value etcetera, all of those are elements that need to be considered when you are trying to develop unique and own able ideas, so we will often push those when we are facilitating, what's the name, how would it works and so that's a really important difference that you brought up. We have a strong bias and it's important to facilitate down a deeper and broader because you have the expertise in the room and you want to leverage that expertise.

Nick Skillicorn: There's also a lot of research coming over the last couple of decades which a lot of people don't know about related to how to improve brainstorming sessions, for example a lot of individuals suggest that individuals should write down their thoughts before coming into a group or the techniques for getting more introverted people involved so they don't get dominated by the extroverts, how do you deal with getting everyone involved in the brainstorming session

Ryan Mattimore: Another great question, thank you for that, we typically invented a technique we called trigger brain walking and it deals with that challenge and we will often start, we probably use brain walking to start maybe 60 or 70 percent of our ideation session , the question is how you are triggering it but essentially the technique is kind of an idea volleyball technique where we set up ideation stations around the room, we have a challenge, we are going to trigger the challenge in some ways so we might trigger it with pictures or whatever where people in teams of two or three go to these wall stations or this ideation stations, generate ideas and then in a kind of an idea volleyball, they rotate to the neighbors station, build on those ideas, rotate again then we will introduce some triggers other keywords they might think about or other pictures, rotate again, we

might even throw a worst idea in there and say okay come up with a better idea, rotate again turn your neighbors bad idea into a better idea etcetera. Well that technique that triggered brain walker technique we invented as a way of sort of quote do the unknown, a technique brain writing which is writing ideas and passing paper. It's a better way to do it, people are up and moving the ideas are public and that gets passed that sort of introvert challenge because you have a team of two or three and those introverts feel much more comfortable writing down and contributing their ideas ultimately. It also get past the politics in the room in that nobody can really take over, the extroverts can't really take over the session because they are in these small ideation teams at the wall. So when you are doing this ideation, they kind of monopolize the conversations.

Nick Skillicorn: These are things that are talked about in 21 days to a big idea or is that something different

Bryan Mattimore: Well 21 days to a big idea is the newest book and that book came out about a year ago, that was in response to a request by a Columbia business school professor of entrepreneurship to help his students get better ideas for their entrepreneurial ventures because he said only about eight percent to ten percent of their ideas were any good. So I developed that program, it's really an exercise program for the mind if you will, that has an intent of not only losing weight or whatever it was but its intent is if you go through this 21 days process, you will have a dozen or more big ideas and it's about an hour a day and it's very doable a program where we just time and focus on people's passion etcetera so that book 21 days to big idea is really written for the individual, the ones who aspire to create a new venture I would say and they are a bunch of five different strategies in there for starting that and also a dozen or so different techniques that we know from our experience will work. The team book if you will, all the expertise around which technique to use when for different kinds of marketing, innovation challenges, that book is idea stormers and that book came out in 2012, it's about twice as long as 21 days to a big idea, there is a tremendous numbers of techniques and original stories there are no apple and swifter stories there I will tell you, but they are all stories from our original work about inventing a new chocolate chips, chips like brownie or inventing a new fuse box, fuse box for corporation or a new go to market strategy for byn Mellon or a new iron for black and Decker, they are all there, if they don't know or haven't read the book, they will be original and fun stories and really then which techniques to use against which challenge leading to what kinds of ideas. so you get sort of the beginning, middle and end of the innovation process and also frankly we haven't talked much about it but also innovation processes, you asked before, if I will or may go back to that, you had said companies often say this, we got plenty of ideas that's not our problem, it's how we get them to market successfully. A lot of these techniques can be used to solve problems along the innovation journey, that is the journey of bringing these new ideas to market and there are also methodologies and structures and processes and principles if you will in that book about how to innovate ideas successfully. Not just get the big idea, but now that you have got that, how do you bring that to the market successfully

Nick Skillicorn: Are there any case studies that we can talk about obviously not disclosing any secret information or a company secret, a lot of the viewers and listeners they keep telling me what they remember the most are the stories about how these techniques actually happened

Bryan Mattimore: We have got another five hours we can take on this right now I have got there are literally hot dozens of different and different stories, I will tell one, I actually opened up idea

stormers with this story, it's a fun one, it's an ideation story, if you want we can then follow with an innovation story but this one is fun, we are asked by Ben and Jerry's to help them name a new flavor it was strawberry and fudge ice cream and this was part of an all day novelty, they call generating novelty ideas, that is not the point so you know popsicles or bonbons or if you are Ben and Jerry you might call them Ben Ben's anyways that was part of an all day ideation and they said well we only have a half hour to generate names for this new strawberry and fudge ice cream and they say can you help with that, and is said a half hour how long have you been working on that they said well three months and I said well I can't do it in a half hour and they said well that's all we got, you have to figure it out. For those listeners, the important thing is to think is well this isn't about stimuli, this is about triggering the brains in different ways and with only a half hour I said I have got to use some kind of stimuli that might trigger up a success and so that gives us back to once focused ideation, what's an appropriate piece of stimuli, well what has Ben and Jerry's represent, for me they represent sort of an entire authoritarian question assumptions point of view on the world which I love and so long story short I said what kind of triggers will do that and I got the idea and I contemplated 10 you know New Yorkers cartoons or Graffiti visuals or whatever it is but ultimately what we used was slang dictionaries so I am you know half a dozen of those, cut them into pieces, pass those out and use those to trigger new ideas and that went to the product that was marketing under the name snafu which stood for strawberries naturally all forged up, we got the name in half hour and it was really a wonderful experience when we succeeded in so little amount of time.

Nick Skillicorn: I love that because obviously when you have time constraints obviously a lot of people get a lot more stressed when there is a dead line and that really doesn't help much with creativity

Ryan Mattimore: You are absolutely right, I think one of the things that actually helped in that session was they were bringing an ice cream all their different flavors throughout the day and so people were like OMG ice cream, by the end of the day I was shaking because I think I was in sugar shock but it made it the session more fun. By the way when we do creativity training and when we often do a day or two day sessions with all these stuff, we will pass out Lego blocks and clay crayon and all kinds of different things to have on the tables not to do an exercise but to bring the stress down to say yeah we are going to have fun and by the way we are happy if you guys do it throughout the sessions because research has shown that people tend to be more involved when they have the opportunities to use their hand and do something, so we try to sort of bring the pressure down, when I facilitate, I am often making jokes, trying to make fun of myself hopefully not the client too much, you try to create an environment of openness and creativity and fun. We have found out that it just works, you want people to be relaxed and you want them to in fact you know the worst idea technique which I mentioned before that is a technique, that is a lot of fun and it loosens people up, because I might say that your idea is not bad enough you got to make it worse not only do you treat them to your desk but they are naked and then you throw pies out you know whatever it is you push them to get worse and worse and worse and that's a fun exercise and everybody knows you are joking around and paradoxically or ironically you often get great stuff out.

Nick Skillicorn: So that's a wonderful example of case study from the creativity ideation side, you mentioned that you have one around innovation as well

Bryan Mattimore: Well you know we helped, I will use a very specific example, I could tell by melon's story, I could tell all kind of stories but again I will just use a product example because I think it's pretty memorable. We had gotten, it was as very simple idea for Thomas's English muffins right, so the English muffin has been around for over a hundred years and they are white English muffins and they were finding that they were losing some of their market, people are getting old or younger people didn't think it was an overly healthy product, so an obvious idea is to put whole grains in the English muffins right but this was a big deal for the organization, we are going to do a brown English muffins are you kidding me, we have been making white English muffins for a hundred years, beyond that the RD people said if we put this higher wheat content in there, the whole grains we are going to lose our nuts and crannies of course Thomas stands for nuts and crannies so we can't do that, well once we are sure we did some qualitative work with younger consumers, they are absolutely tremendously enthusiastic about this new product possibility called hardy grains when R and D saw that even though they said they couldn't do it, they saw that passion, they saw the commitment from consumers who are willing to pay more by the way for these products and they said okay we will figure it out and they did and so now hardy grains it's been restage and renamed but they now represent this higher margin of line of products, now represent this higher margin line of products that represents their business so that's a good example of being creative about how you bring things to market right, we had a similar situation for laser and sockets for craftsmen and the buyer said I am really not interested, we brought consumers and they showed how passionate they were about this and they were willing to pay premium for it and all of a sudden they said okay you will go launch this. The point is that there are political challenges and road blocks that the organizations will throw up always, always and always also you have to be resourceful and creative about how you bring these to the market and by the way we believe strongly in qualitative work so we do a lot of focus group if you want to call it qualitative product testing when we are talking about new products to make sure that we are getting all the elements right which is the package, the price, the promotion all those things need to come together to get a successful new product

Nick Skillicorn: I think that really exemplifies something else a lot of companies forget which is innovation is not just the ideation session, there is so much that happens after that before you get a successful product and more importantly profit.

Bryan Mattimore: Well you are so right, my partner here at growth engine Garry Fraser when he was named market of the year by brand week, it was fermented and well meant that you know it took them probably five years to get that proposition correct and one of the assumptions by they questioned by the way was does this come in, does tooth paste comes in a tube and so they probably know they are going to do a dispenser where they had the baking soda and peroxide merge on the tooth paste itself but one of the more brilliant things he did, he needed ten million dollars to build the lines for doing this product and so instead of going, they had a big presentation at the board and that was a no go decision but he was very smart about it, he went to every board member a month before the meeting, do you have any concerns, is there anything we need to do, is there anything we need to research and he did that for every board member, got all their input, dealt with their challenges and by the time it came to devote that 10 million dollars to the development, they were all on board. That's a good example of how you have to be creative in the process bringing things to market especially if you are working with a risk averse organization which frankly most organization are, they are risk averse.

Nick Skillicorn: What I like about that as well is it is a good example of really thinking through being creative in the way that you approach the whole start to finish of the innovation not just the creative part of generating the ideas, certain people who would say you need to walk the walk when it comes to being creative

Bryan Mattimore: Yea we have talked about this before, we call that eating your own dog food and we like to think that here at growth engine we are being creative about our own creative processes and so not only is that inventing new techniques like we invented a technique for a project called patent prompts where that technique is you know do keywords searching of the areas you are trying to invent in and use those abstracts of patterns to trigger new ideas but beyond that we are also always inventing new products and services because we are creative guys and we should be able to come up with new product and services. It would be fun to offer besides creativity training, action learning, getting people to come up with ideas while they learn techniques, we for instance invented a methodology, a strategy methodology called disruptive war gaming where we have companies role-play known competitors but then also potentially disruptive competitors, so if you are in the insurance business that might be Amazon, Google and Wal-Mart, your role playing them because they could be huge disruptors I mean in the insurance business, another thing we have created a sort a service again being creative ourselves is a global virtual ideation service, we create that for large pharmaceutical companies and you know since we created this is our intellectual property, it's how do you get people from around the world to virtually create ideas together so that's a methodology. Another one is trade link etcetera. So the point here and by the way trade link is involving the trade or the retailer in the creative process. So the point here is that all these methodologies can be used not only to generate ideas but to improve the processes within your own organization and by the way the last thing I will say about that is that we have a line that we have used in articles that we have written. Our philosophy is you don't innovate by changing the culture, you change the culture by innovating and what that means is that a lot of companies are coming to say okay you need a new process that's going to be our fix and you will be more innovative, we don't go that way, we go in and say give us a project and we will hopefully succeed in that project and we will build your innovation processes around that once we have gotten to know your business better, once we have seen the gaps in innovation methodology. It's very much a sort of bottom up approach, one company we created called the dig team disruptive innovation group because but we did that sort of organically rather than saying here is one process that will fit our company because we don't believe that's true. In all industries, different industries are different, you know if you are in the technology field you need to be faster with your innovation process frankly than you are in the food business. The point here is to be creative about your own processes and always if you will be working to find new ways to do things.

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely. I am sure we can keep talking for hours and hours on the subject but unfortunately we are coming up to the end of the session and one thing I like to do with all of the experts before we finish though, for the viewers and listeners out there, if you have got one piece of actionable insight or one tip or something that people can try to actually start getting benefits from what we have talked about today

Bryan Mattimore: Yeah I think we got a lot of them but one that I would suggest and then that folks can try immediately after this is over, we were asked by a large printing process firm if you will to get ideas from their employees and of course the first thing you think about a suggestion box and those

have been dismal failures around the world there are exceptions with Toyota and dart and free way but most part, those have been terrible failures and we analyzed that, we thought about it. Two reasons, one is you need to have tremendous commitment and follow up to a suggestions for a program to work, and the other is, this is less obvious that ideas cannot be fully born, there are ugly babies that need to be nursed and helped and grown. So the technique that we came up with, you might think of it as an interactive suggestion box, it's very simple, we call it the white board technique, the way it work you just get a white board, you put it in a public place, it could be outside your office, it could be in the restroom, it doesn't matter, you put a challenge in the board, how we cut cost, how do we increase sales, how do we invent new products, give me new package, whatever it is, you decide how long you are going to work on that idea, usually seven to ten days, you encourage your co workers to add to the throughout that seven day period each day you are checking off one of the days at the end of seven or ten days whatever it is, you then take all those ideas and you do something with them, you could use them as an ideation session , you will find often that you will have great ideas on there. The printing company, they had two pattern of ideas that came out doing this , where their engineering team had been working on it for months unsuccessfully, this is by putting it on the shop floor, we did it, we recently did project with armor auto and they were trying to invent a new package and they put in the lunch room, they had a \$25 dollar award and after ten days they had several break through, new package ideas, one of which they are pursuing , so this is a very simple easy technique which people can try with their teams right away

Nick Skillicorn: I love that and I think a lot of people can try that out for themselves and that I know you have got a lot more information that people can find as insights and links to your books and everything we're going to get all of the links on the screen below in the description but where are those links going to take people.

Bryan Mattimore: Well, one is our website grow-thengine.com that is www.growth-engine.com and that has many of our methodologies in there, there is also an idea tool in there, if you are looking to an increase sales, there's a technique called the primary definition technique, we use that for one of our clients to increase sales by fifty two percent, just that one technique so that certainly resource the books, I may be a ted biased but I think the books are pretty good, I think they will help your teams in these processes, the idea stormers certainly and the 21 days to big ideas and they are available online and frankly if somebody wants to call me, pick up the phone and give me a call me, its 2038574494 and I am happy to talk about any challenges your teams might be having or it could be an innovation challenge, ideation challenge, creative challenge, whatever it is feel free to give me a call and I am happy to talk to you.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect Bryan it's been wonderful having you here and I am sure we will chat again in the future quite soon

Bryan Mattimore: Thanks Nick I think it was quite really fun and I appreciate your questions, I feel like you were robbing soft balls to me that I could maybe hit a single to it those breaks, thank you was a great stuff I enjoyed it.

Nick Skillicorn: No problem