

Cyriel Kortleven

THE PATH TO CREATIVE THINKING

Break, burn or ban the box

Text by Jonathan Ramael

To succeed in the event business – especially in this day and age – you have to stay ahead of the curve. Think on your feet. Adapt to new situations. Keep learning new things on a daily basis. It's all absolutely necessary if you want to offer your clients a better, more efficient product than your competitors do. Creativity is crucial in this process. The ability to change your thinking patterns and come up with innovative solutions to a problem is a business-saving quality. Creativity and innovation are the main subjects of sought-after international speaker **Cyriel Kortleven**. After his interesting and interactive presentation during last month's Site EMEA Forum, BBT Online invited him for a talk to further elaborate the matter. This is what we found out.



The Curse of knowledge

'Being creative has a lot to do with breaking out of old, fixed **patterns**. Our entire personal and professional life is an accumulation of countless of these little patterns. They keep us going. We repeat them because they proved successful in the past. But what if one of them suddenly stops working? It's very difficult to let these mental safety lines go and start acting differently. Creative thinking helps you deal with this. The first step in the process is making people aware of their patterns, which is not an easy thing to do. A fish, for example, can't understand the concept of water until it's pulled on land. It has simply never known anything else.'

'In the event business, many suffer from what I like to call "**The Curse of Knowledge**". The more experience we gain, the more we tend to "know how things are done". We organize our events in a certain way because they worked fine the previous time. You know the clichés: an event should be organized in a fixed location, you invite speakers, people listen to them and afterwards you organize some kind of networking moment before letting them go home. Why should it be like this? Because it feels familiar? What if we don't invite speakers? What if the attendants decide what's on the agenda? Would it be so much worse? Or would it be better and more surprising?'

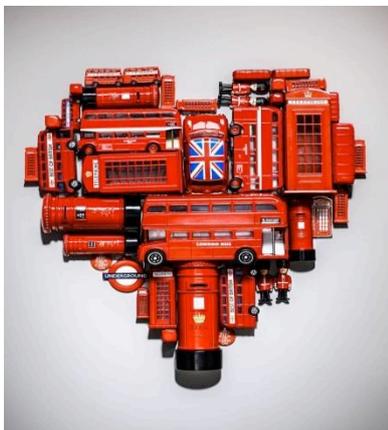
‘Being creative is looking past these fixed assumptions and start playing with them, testing them out. Does this mean you have to turn everything upside down? Of course not. Little changes can make a world of difference. Nowadays, more than 90% of event managers are still playing safe, but change is slowly dripping in. Times of crisis are often times of change as well.’

Killing the idea killers

‘The second major step to thinking creatively, is identifying and dealing with what I call **idea killers**. When we are confronted with new ideas, we have the tendency to quickly dismiss them with all sorts of standard arguments. “We tried it already. The client won’t like it. There’s no budget.” et cetera. By immediately pointing out everything that might go wrong, a lot of opportunities are missed.’

‘It’s very important to turn these “yes, but...” arguments into a “Yes, and...”. A good way to do this, is applying the **three minute rule** at your next brainstorm session. During three full minutes, no one can dismiss any idea. Instead, everyone has to come up with several “yes, and” phrases, building on each previous idea. After three minutes, you’ll have a lot of new ideas at your disposal. Most of them will probably be crazy or useless, but a few might be interesting, or useful in a different way.’

‘Another good way to gain new insights is looking at issues from a different **point of view**. Don’t always think as an event manager. How would an eight year old want this event to be organised? How would Steve Jobs do it? It will give you a completely different view on the matter. Imagine for example, that you were blind and you had to organize something for other blind people. You would rely much more on your other senses. How can you use this insight when dealing with a regular audience? Could you organize something around touch or sound? It could create a special moment.’



‘By allowing these different mind-sets to influence you, you’ll often gain valuable ideas. City tours during an event for example, are often very standardized happenings. They’ll show you the main sights and that’s it. In London they changed this by thinking out of the box. What would I want to see in London if I was in love? What if I was feeling very adventurous? What if I had a hangover? By changing their point of view, they came up with several different routes based on different emotions, making for a very different kind of tour.’

Little thoughts make for big changes

‘As said before, small ideas can make a lot of difference. You have to get out of your comfort zone and learn how to **make the right associations** to come up with these thoughts. What, for example, is networking? Meeting new people, right? On one occasion, we divided our delegates into small groups and gave each of them an hour to go out and find a local to talk to. Meeting people who knew the destination but had nothing to do with the event gave these delegates new viewpoints and experiences.’

‘**Business blind dates** are another example we tried out. When guests arrived, we randomly divided them into small groups of strangers. They got the opportunity to briefly get acquainted with each other but, more importantly, they were brought back together on three separate moments during that day to exchange the views and experiences they gained during the event. It’s such a simple idea and it’s completely free, but it’s rarely done. Usually people come in, have a drink with colleagues they know, listen to the speaker, have another drink and go home. Did they talk to anyone they didn’t already know? Chances are slim. But when you ask people why they attend these events, they will give you answers like: for inspiration, to get to know new contacts, you name it. It doesn’t just work like that though. A lot of people need a little push to go talk to strangers. You have to give them the opportunity and guide them to it, because most people won’t do it by themselves. Small changes like this make sure your guests are networking in a fun and meaningful way.’

Less is more

‘Being an event manager is a stressful business. Schedules are full and tight and conditions constantly change. Burnouts are not uncommon, and a lot of people try to do more than they can handle. It’s not always productive. Sometimes it’s better to do less to gain more. Three principles are important.’



‘First of all: what are the **things you should just stop doing** at all? We do so much stuff that isn’t useful in the slightest sense, and it causes stress we shouldn’t have. For example: why do we keep giving these damn goody bags filled with folders and booklets? Practically no one ever reads them and 95% of them go straight in the trash. Just stop handing them out! If you really want people to take some info home with them, give them a little memory stick.’

‘The second principle is to always **keep it simple**. For example: the whole ritual of trying to divide guests into different groups in advance. Why do we do it? Some people cancel, some just don’t show up and some other will want to change groups. You’ve worked out an entire

system for nothing. Just do it on the spot. Give each of them a coloured sticker and give them one minute to trade it with someone if they want to change groups. Done. That's it. No stress for you, and it even gives your guests a first opportunity to talk to each other.'

Last but not least: you just have to **let some things go**. Don't worry about everything and trust in the fact that some things will just work out. People are smart enough to do certain things by themselves. Most events are planned out from the minute people come in to the moment they leave again. Why not do it differently? Plan nothing in the last two hours but a [World Café](#). Divide people into several groups, give them one central question to discuss and then collect their main points. "What did you learn on this conference? What will you tell your colleagues tomorrow? What are you planning to do with the knowledge you gained to take action?" Let them share their thoughts and listen to each other. By asking them directly what insights they'll try to implement in the future, you've given them the first push to actually do it.'

Practical examples

'**Pecha Kucha** (origin: Japan) is a good example of the less is more principle. Several speakers are invited, and every one of them can use 20 slides. These slides are automatically changed every 20 seconds. A speaker has exactly 6.40 minutes to get his/her point across. I can assure you: it's very difficult to prepare such a presentation, but if you do it right, people will get the core of your message. By using this system, you could programme four different speakers in less than half an hour. Afterwards, you can do a Q&A or a workshop to get deeper into the matter.'

'The participant is getting more and more active during events. [Unconferences](#), world cafés, [open space meetings](#), pop-up meetings: all of these concepts give guests the chance to work around a theme and bring their own content to the table. It's still an event, just with a different kind of experts.'

'Last January I was invited to speak on the PGM Open, a conference on programme management in the Netherlands. They seamlessly applied the less is more principle. Only two speakers were invited. There was no keynote speech at the start of the event. When guests arrived they could choose among several options: workshops, pecha kucha sessions, small table talks around one subject, contributing to the idea wall, et cetera. After about an hour, there was a plenary session with the keynote speaker, and after that people were divided into small groups again. The event took place from 2 to 8 pm, avoiding all traffic jams. It was a combination of implementing all these little ideas into one very successful event.'



'The key to creative thinking is finding the courage to change. Recognize your own curse of knowledge. Think about what works and what doesn't. What you should stop doing and what you should do simpler. Let some things go and trust others doing them. Have faith in trying. Don't dismiss ideas before really thinking about them. If you're not sure, try it on a small scale. If it works and people like it, do it bigger next time. But always try.'

For more info

- You can find out more about Cyriel on www.21lobsterstreet.com or www.cyrielkortleven.com.
- Looking for some quick help on how to boost your event? Click here for 21 practical tips: www.slideshare.net/cyrielkortleven/21-ways-to-boost-your-event.
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