



## Harnessing Social Brainstorming for Business Decisions

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### *Forward*

So what do YOU know?

You know some people, you've lived in some places. You've had a variety of experiences and developed some opinions and preferences. There are things you deeply believe in and things you couldn't care less about. In fact there is so much to you that it would take years to capture it all and write it all down.

Now let's say we're working with a B2B client with 800 employees, every one of them as complex and individual as you.

And that client says "I'm not sure I'm getting the best out of these people. I'd like to find out how to improve X" (X might for example be morale, or sales figures or staff turnover or strategic alignment).

Oh, and another thing, these 800 people are spread across 15 different locations and in the current tough market conditions there are rumours of a round of redundancies so they could be a little wary of speaking up in front of their peers.

Now with an audience of experienced researchers I'm sure there are many possible solutions running through our collective brain right now. But if we really want to get to the heart of this matter, to get under the skin of the employees and give the client what they need to take better decisions - quickly and cost effectively - then it's not an easy one to crack.

But these days, thanks to web 2.0 technology, we have new tools at our fingertips that, used wisely, can help with this kind of challenge, building on research expertise from traditional methods but turning up the volume to deliver faster results.

In this paper I will outline various approaches and then focus on one of them - the social brainstorm - explaining how it works and giving some case studies based on real life examples of times when social brainstorming has helped organisations harness the massive wealth of ideas, experiences and points of view that rests in their employees. Social

brainstorming - the water cooler writ large; taking what works best about the water cooler and dealing with some of its constraints.

## **Introduction**

*"While so much of the buzz around Web 2.0 has focused on the business-to-consumer market, the greatest opportunity today ... is in the business-to-business collaboration space," Oliver Young, analyst, Forrester Research*

As the Facebook phenomena ripples through the social world and Twitter makes inroads into business life, the timescales and arms length approach of many traditional research approaches can start to feel inappropriate. Dynamic, live research conversations are one of the new developments that lead to conclusive information for the client within a matter of hours, drawing on the skills developed by both qual and quant researchers while responding to the challenges of urgency, cost pressure, global spread and remote working of business today.

## **The merits of social brainstorming**

**First let us consider what we mean by social brainstorming.**

The simplest example is maybe the water cooler conversation. A few individuals gather and chat. They talk freely, without an agenda and probably without some of the peer pressure of a meeting. One of them has an idea, another builds on it, a third sees how it might be made to happen. Suddenly a new initiative comes shimmering into life and maybe the course of history is changed.

So we know that people can do this stuff. They can suggest, evaluate, consider, build on and sometimes conclude and take action. The limitations of the Water Cooler though are obvious and with today's geographical dispersion, level of competition and pace of change, few companies can afford to leave their decision making to chance in this way.

More and more organisations are turning to structured social brainstorming tools, that employees and other stakeholders can easily access, in order to tap into this wealth of ideas and knowledge.

*Following in the footsteps of the US President ( online town hall, Hulu-streamed press conference, and weekly radio address on YouTube), the State Department has decided to try social media on for size as well.*

*The Summit of the Americas, where democratic leaders from 34 countries will gather on April 17 - 19 to discuss pressing issues.. the State Department has .. created an online center — The Summit of the Americas Digital Town Hall — for social media sharing.*

*Concerned and politically engaged individuals can use the new site to submit their questions to U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who will be in attendance at the Summit.*

*(Mashable, The Social Media Guide, 2009)*

### **Social Brainstorming Methods**

The most authentic views are maybe the conversations we overhear on the train, at the bar, in the corner of the school playground. If only we could gather all of those in an efficient and meaningful way. And then make sense of some of the massive amount of data we would have collected.

In the past this would have been impossible, but with advances in technology, particularly web 2.0 applications, researchers are beginning to wake up to the opportunities that are beginning to develop.

That’s great news, but it can also be rather daunting. What does it all mean? How can we use it safely, reliably and effectively? Here we consider some of the tools that are already around and some of the pros and cons.

*Social networking tools and internal wikis will have the greatest impact on workplace collaboration. Technologies such as forums and RSS have a future in the enterprise but are currently underused, while podcasts have a limited future as an enterprise tool to increase productivity and enhance collaboration. (Forrester, 2008)*

<b>Table 1</b>		
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
The Water Cooler	Tried and tested	Limited group Difficult to observe Time consuming to gather data Difficult to process
Conventional focus group	Tried and tested Also identify body language	Limited numbers Moderator influence Time consuming to analyse multiple groups
Blogs and chatrooms	Free (apart from the time you’ll spend looking at them)	Un-moderated (so hard to find what you’re looking for)

	Global coverage Good for early adopters' views	Unrepresentative (tend to attract those who feel strongly) Not B2B focused Miss body language Not real time, less focused data collection
Social Networks ("Facebook at work")	Contextualised debate Peer group Collaboration channel Global coverage	Conclusions hard to identify Resistance from some employees Miss body language Not real time, less focused data collection
Wikis	Can be business sponsored Growing sector Consensus surfaces Global coverage	More appropriate for knowledge management than research
Online Social Brainstorm	Fast and global Anonymous / confidential Conclusive, ranked output Real time so energised Cost effective Up to 1000 participants	Miss body language (use language analysis to partly substitute for this) Unfamiliar to many researchers Need new approach to stimulus material

As shown in Table 1, there are pros and cons to all methods – as so often in research we need to make a trade off when we decide how to investigate an issue. However, there are significant advantages to the Online Social Brainstorm and we will be looking at this approach in more detail.

### How does an online brainstorm work?

**The research technique:** an algorithm-driven real-time brainstorming tool for 10-1000 participants is accessed via a simple click. However many individuals are involved in the discussion, each participant only sees a manageable amount of data on their screen thanks to peer review of all contributions which determines the exposure that a comment enjoys. Simply put, the hot topics rise to the top while the unsupported statements wither away.

Everybody can say exactly what they like when they like - no waiting for the more voluble members to finish, no fear of looking stupid or damaging your career prospects. And everybody's point of view is considered for every statement that is made.

The result is a ranked list of statements which can be analysed for activity behaviour, thematic content and Language profile<sup>1</sup>. The most interesting way to see how that might

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<sup>1</sup> We will **offer** an online brainstorming event for all BIG delegates to personally experience this technique after the conference. This will give us a chance to reach qualitative

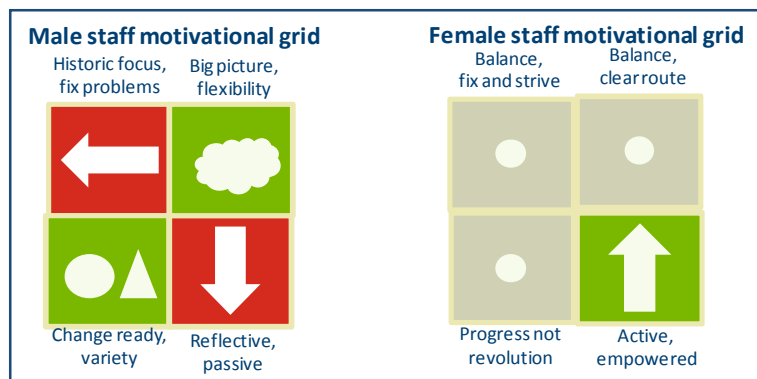
help is to consider some real life challenges faced by organisations and the way they have used online brainstorming to solve them.

## The analysis process for online brainstorming

The output from the discussion is analysed at different levels:

1. **Activity analysis:** how many participated versus those invited (indicates interest level in subject), how active were they (engagement with subject), to what extent did they agree with each other and did they build on each others' statements? Regardless of the content of the conversation, these measures give an indication of the group's motivation around the subject and are easy to benchmark.
2. **Thematic analysis:** all comments have already been entered by participants and appear in the output ranked by the level of support they received within the group. They can then be coded according to the content, clustered and recoded if necessary so that a picture of the discussion begins to emerge. When the same discussion guide is used with more than one group, comparisons are possible and certain themes will be seen to be strongest in each group.
3. **Language and behaviour (LaB) analysis:** using LaB analysis of metamodels as reflected in language patterns, insights into the underlying state of mind of the group can be developed. This information can be benchmarked and presented to the client in the form of the Motivation Grid (see example below) and recommended communications styles to encourage and accelerate the behaviour change which is usually required whether it is a new business development or an internal change process that is being examined.

In this example, the same discussion guide was used with male and then female employees to identify their attitudes to work and try to understand the lower levels of job satisfaction expressed by the female staff. As you see in the diagram, the men's



energy tends to stem from their (positive) view of the overall aims of the organisation which combines with their tendency in this organisation to accept what is asked of them and get on with fixing problems. They were much less affected by what the women saw as moral failures by the business to deliver on its stated objectives. The women on the

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conclusions and ideas that can help shape future events. For more information go to [thethinkingtank.com/big.htm](http://thethinkingtank.com/big.htm)

other hand tended to have a balanced view on most dimensions, with a tendency to be more proactive and take personal responsibility for what was happening both in their own role and in the organisation as a whole. They were less convinced by a "the end justifies the means" approach.

## Ten top tips for effective online research

1. As with any research, make sure the client is completely clear about what they want to discover and why
2. Start from desired output and work backwards to develop the discussion guide
3. Stick to around ten minutes per topic. This gives participants time to consider and share their own views, then reflect and react on others' comments, refine their ideas together and score ideas to develop consensus
4. Use poll questions occasionally, particularly to compare positions between discussions
5. Keep the questions as conversational and personal as possible to avoid standard, business-speak responses.
6. Use a prober<sup>2</sup> to seed more provocative views to test the boundaries
7. Avoid dull, repetitive questions
8. Keep a close eye on activity levels and intercede as required to keep the conversation running at the right pace for the group
9. Use Language and Behaviour (LaB) profiling to increase the insight level and understand the motivation patterns of the respondents.
10. Analyse the results with a clear focus on "so what?" from the client perspective

## B2B Case Studies of Social Brainstorming

The following illustrations are all based on real-life projects that have used social brainstorming. As issues are often commercially sensitive, the particular organisations are not named.

### Case 1: A reality check for senior management

*"Of course they all understand the strategy, this conference will be about how we implement it". The client before the discussion*

*"We can't have a conference about strategy implementation now" The client after the discussion*

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<sup>2</sup> A prober participates as a standard participant but is working alongside the brief to test more extreme hypotheses or raise issues that have not been mentioned. It is a more subtle role than the moderator and participants do not feel the same pressure to agree with the authority figure.

**Challenge:** Improving the relevance of the agenda for a Top 100 global conference for a multinational corporation.

**Approach:** Online brainstorms were set up to identify priority actions for the conference. All employees were invited and the debates were segmented by seniority and geography.

**Research results:** Analysis of the debates showed that a significant number of the employees were not aware of the strategy, and even those that were did not necessarily support or even understand it.

**Business results:** This Early Warning given to senior management from the online brainstorms helped them realise that the first job was to clarify and communicate the strategy, then build alignment before asking employees to get on and implement it. The conference was postponed and hundreds of thousands of pounds of travel expenses – not to mention the implications of disengagement or an unexpected rebellion on site – were saved.

**Observation:** “Whenever I have said that in a meeting everybody has always agreed with me!” CEO observing the underwhelming response to a statement he entered into the debate. The need to say the right thing in large corporations can cloud the issues and give misleading results. Anonymity is important to clear this restriction and get to the real truths.

## Case 2: Targeting R&D

*The success of any enterprise ultimately rises and falls on the quality and speed of its decision making. Enterprises that fail to use modern communications technologies, that do not leverage the knowledge base of workers, and limit the potential for collaboration, run the very real risk of falling behind their competition. (Wainwright Research, 2005)*

**Challenge:** A pharmaceutical company needed to make more effective use of its R&D budget for a high-selling drug.

**Approach:** By running an online brainstorm with front line sales representatives, wisdom was collected from every corner of the market, processed and prioritised.

**Research results:** Ranked requirements for development (these included the drug itself as expected, but also generated valuable and actionable ideas for packaging, communications and distribution)

**Business results:** The sales-force were motivated by their inclusion in the decision-making process and the priority changes identified by them were cheaper and easier to implement than the developments the R&D function had in mind.

**Observation:** The people on the ground know far more about the customer's needs than they generally get the chance to express. Or those views are welcomed but difficult to gather and analyse, or distorted by one or two more vocal individuals. The peer review implicit in online brainstorms takes **everybody's** view into account, including those who never speak up at a meeting. Nobody has to wait for their turn to speak, or be embarrassed at expressing a "silly" point of view.

### Case 3: Focusing Customer Acquisition

*"The general idea is an old one, that any two cells or systems of cells that are repeatedly active at the same time will tend to become 'associated', so that activity in one facilitates activity in the other." (Hebb, 1949)*

**Challenge:** A global business consultancy was under pressure to identify the best sectors and approaches to develop new business

**Approach:** They decided to harness their own top brains to solve the problem. They ran an online brainstorm with top performing consultants from around the globe.

**Research results:** Participants identified best practice, prioritised target sectors and gave some excellent ideas on how to communicate effectively with those targets.

**Business results:** A strategic leap forward in new business development from a single one hour session. As a bonus, the consultancy felt they then had developed an in-house process that could also be sold to their own clients.

**Observation:** The knowledge is often already in the organisation. The challenge is finding effective ways to extract it. As well as the obvious benefits of using the collective corporate brain to solve problems, the very fact of involving opinion leaders in the process builds alignment to the new strategy before it is identified and shared.

### Case 4: Understanding Diversity Impact on Employee Satisfaction

*New and surprising findings about career differences between female and male full-time, tenure-track, and tenured faculty in science, engineering, and mathematics at the nation's top research universities (Committee on Gender Differences in the Careers of Science, 2009)*

**Challenge:** When you're running a skills business, it is a problem that the leaving rate for executive women in a major financial services company is much higher than it is for men.

**Approach:** Parallel online brainstorms with men and women (separately) clarified the differences in motivating factors and reasons to leave.

**Research results:** When asked what got them out of bed in the morning, the women tended to talk about a need for interesting work that made a difference, while the men tended to be more aware of status and reward. Language patterns also varied and it was observed that reward packages tended to reflect the male needs and language rather than the female as described in the Motivation Grid example above.

**Business results:** With conclusive data it became clearer how to structure staff reward and motivation in ways that could work for a wider range of attitudes towards work.

**Observation:** The opportunity to contribute anonymously to the debate was a key factor in allowing participants (both male and female) to express their views honestly and openly, without fear of overstepping the “political correctness” line. Probers from HR were able to test more extreme views and were reassured to see them rejected. For any diversity issues there are important insights to be gained into motivating staff even though they may be very different from the board / decision makers.

### Case 5: Increasing Strategic Alignment

*"The future belongs to brands that will not only engage with customers but also empower them to create their own communities" Yann Motte, Chief Executive and Co-Founder, Webjam ["and that goes for employees too", Catherine Shovlin]*

**Challenge:** The management team no longer understands the workforce in a rapidly growing technology business and this is compromising achievement of business goals. The typical senior manager is a white man in his 50s living in Western Europe after 30 years working for the same company, while the workforce is largely Asian, often female, in their 20s and 30s yet already on their third or fourth employer.

**Approach:** A series of online brainstorming sessions with different types of employees – eg recent graduate entrants, new recruits in new technology centres, career managers in head office – all following a common discussion guide and with the same moderator team (2 provider consultants with online brainstorming expertise) plus 2 staff from the client company – one from strategic planning and one from HR).

**Research results:** Analysis highlighted the gaps and overlaps between the groups both in what they needed to hear and how they needed to hear it. A communications plan was developed to reactivate the workforce and align everybody around some common goals.

**Business results:** the need for clarity and meaningful communication around the strategy was highlighted. Key barriers to implementing had been identified and management could focus on removing those barriers to accelerate the change process.

**Observation:** It is easy to assume that everybody thinks the same way. But every profiling tool from Myers Briggs onwards tells us that this is neither accurate nor desirable. An objective and measured profiling tool that can classify staff into typologies, as has been the norm in consumer segmentation for years, can give management a way to increase morale and the bottom line.

## Summary

*But what Page found was that a group made up of some smart agents and some not-so-smart agents always did better than a group made up just of smart agents...  
... the smartest groups then, are made up of people with **diverse** perspectives who are able to stay **independent** of each other. (Surowiecki, 2004)*

It is always good to listen. Online brainstorming has made it possible to listen to more people, who are more dispersed, and then make more sense of the output. Questions like "what are the three highest priorities for our sales staff in the next 12 months", "what are the top trends among our client base?", "why do junior staff feel much less engaged with the business?" can be addressed efficiently and conclusively - without any prejudice of what the issues will be. Inclusivity is high - less confident staff or those who do not have English as their first language, can take their time to express themselves without fear of ridicule and the protection of anonymity gives all participants a safe space to express themselves and say the unsayable.

Alongside traditional research techniques, the online brainstorm has a valuable role to play in quickly delivering insightful data for large groups.

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