

Find That Ding Moment

Don Draper had to go across the country to find inspiration. You don't.



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Plenty of people had questions after watching Don Draper's weekslong, cross-country journey of self-loathing, confessions and support groups end with a Coke and a smile. Mine was this: Does creative inspiration really have to come at such a high price?

To answer that, I called Tom Kelley, a partner with global design and innovation company Ideo, which has helped firms like Apple and Microsoft develop groundbreaking new products. Kelley is also the co-author of the 2014 book *Creative Confidence*, which posits that creativity is not just the province of artists or ad men.

"Creativity is a muscle," he says. "You have to work it continually. If you do, it will get stronger and easier to use." Here are four ways Kelley suggests you can develop, strengthen and flex your own creative muscles.

THINK LIKE A TRAVELER

“When you go to a different city, or especially a different country, you are hyperobservant,” Kelley says. “So you see the differences in how people live and behave. You find ideas that you want to bring back home and incorporate into your own life.” That’s exactly what Rob Biederman, co-founder of Boston-based HourlyNerd, which connects freelance MBA business consultants with companies, does. “When I want to innovate, I open a browser window and navigate to our site, pretending as if I’m an outsider, experiencing it for the first time.”

DAYDREAMING IS OK

“Often when you let your mind drift, you find the most creative ideas,” Kelley says. “We call that a time of ‘relaxed attention,’ instead of ‘daydreaming.’” For Brooklyn-based entrepreneur and business coach Sabina Hitchen, that kind of inspiration hits when she’s cutting vegetables for dinner. “It’s rare that you’ll find someone say that they broke through to a new creative level while staring at their computer,” she says. “Break away.”

Val Wright, a Pasadena-based consultant who has worked with Microsoft and Starbucks, suggests you schedule that breakaway. “Book some time for silence each week and don’t let anything human or electronic interrupt it,” she says.

HAVE AN "IDEA WALLET"

Finding inspiration isn’t much good if you don’t capture all your new thoughts. That’s why Kelley suggests that you develop at least one method for collecting your creativity. He calls it an “idea wallet,” but you might call it Evernote or a whiteboard.

For John DeGroote, of Dallas-based dispute-resolution center DeGroote -Partners, it’s called a notebook he keeps in his back pocket. “Once you write something down, your mind can sort of let it go,” DeGroote says, “and it often comes back in surprising ways.”

Brent Spencer, a novelist and -screenwriter who is the director of the creative--writing program at Creighton University, uses multiple “idea wallets” — all digital. “I use an app that keeps track of all my tasks, big and small. That way I can keep my head clear for bigger thoughts.”

FIGHT FEAR WITH SMALL STEPS

Don Draper isn't going to create that Coke ad alone, and he's not going to do it all at once. There will be typed drafts, storyboards, sample songs, casting and so on. In this way (and maybe only this way), we can emulate the *Mad Men* protagonist by taking small steps with our own big ideas.

"Break the idea into a series of small experiments," Kelley says. "Try to prototype it. Some experiments will fail. But if the costs are low, you won't be branded a failure. You just have to have the courage to move forward."

FIVE "AHA" BUSINESS MOMENTS HAD BY COMPANY FOUNDERS

1. Sara Blakely, Spanx

Looking to get a slimmer profile for a pair of cream-colored pants she planned to wear to a party in 2000, Blakely cuts the feet off of a pair of control-top pantyhose and realizes she's created a product thousands of women will also want.

2. Willis Carrier, Carrier Corp.

Watching fog roll across a train platform in Pittsburgh in 1902, Carrier envisions a machine that passes air through water, creating a fog that can be harnessed to control humidity and change the temperature in a room.

3. Ingvar Kamprad, IKEA

Nearly a decade after founding IKEA in 1943, Kamprad hears of an employee who removed the legs of a table so it would better fit into a customer's car. He decides then to make flat-packing, self-assembled furniture his company's mainstay.

4. Hamdi Ulukaya, Chobani

After throwing away a junk-mail flyer listing the sale of a former yogurt factory, Ulukaya digs the flyer out of the trash, suddenly inspired to buy the factory and use it to make the kind of yogurt he had growing up on a dairy farm in Turkey.

5. Drew Houston, Dropbox

During a four-hour bus ride, Houston realizes he's forgotten to pack the USB memory stick containing files for his most recent project. He immediately begins writing code for a service that will allow him to sync files online.

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