

**NEASIST Talk – Jill S. Stover**  
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**Providence, RI**

[Important Note: I use my so-called-script so that I don't forget the major points I want to make but I don't read from it! What you'll read is hardly a verbatim account, but you'll get the idea. I don't claim to be the best speaker ever, but I figured if I didn't mention this, you'd all be a tad horrified by what you read. :-)]

## **Intro**

I've become really passionate about this topic as I've been studying marketing and marketing library services, and so I'm not looking at creativity as in artistic talent, but rather as it relates to marketing and business innovations. Among librarians and others outside the field, marketing is often characterized in terms of gimmicky ads and clever PR stunts, but this widespread perception does marketing, and librarians, a great disservice. It's more useful to consider marketing as a means of making services better. Marketing techniques allow us to seek out and fulfill patron needs with tailored services that account for patrons' unique needs and preferences. Imagining how we can serve our patrons better through marketing requires a continuous, concentrated infusion of creativity, from the earliest planning stages through service implementation and evaluation. If marketing is what connects us to our patrons, and creativity is what allows us to do good marketing, then creative thinking is a core competency we must all learn to master. Once I made these connections, I felt compelled to explore how we can become better creative thinkers. I'm just beginning this exploration, but I've discovered a lot of helpful practices and insights that I'm privileged to share with you today.

So. Creativity. Creativity is a loaded concept. Everyone has preconceived notions about what creativity means and what it means to be a creative person. Let me do a quick survey: How many of you would identify yourselves as a creative person?

For those of you who raised your hands: congratulations! You've already overcome one of the major obstacles that stands in the way of radical innovations – not appreciating your own creative abilities. The fact is, every single person in this audience, and every single person in your libraries for that matter, is creative. Your challenge is to improve your creativity using the techniques and ideas I'll present, and then to take your creative expertise back to foster creativity within your institutions. Nurturing the creativity in our fellow colleagues is crucial since, as we'll see, creativity depends on a total organization effort.

For those of you who didn't raise your hands, my goal is that, if I were to do this survey again at the end of my talk, you'd all enthusiastically stick your hands up into the air. I'm going to give you the information you need to wake up your creative talents, and hopefully inspire confidence in your own abilities.

Now that we know we're all creative, let's consider what it means to "be creative." Just as many of us consider ourselves to be more or less creative, we also hold different beliefs about what creativity is. What words do you associate with the word 'creativity'?

These are some of the words I'd associate with creativity:

- **Destructive:** When you build something, you destroy something else. Usually involves letting go of the status quo.
- **Uncertain:** Treading into new territory (new ideas, new services, new patrons).
- **Contentious:** When there are a lot of variables, it's hard to reach consensus. Argument is healthy and inevitable.
- **Risky:** Working with new ideas, new patrons, new services means there are a lot of variables. Risk is inevitable.
- **Chaotic:** There's no such thing as a nice, orderly, sedate brainstorming session. At least not if you're doing it right. Ambiguity is a part of the process.
- **Proactive:** Creative professionals seek out opportunities to apply their ideas. They're always on the lookout for problems they can solve and underserved populations.
  - There's a book called Zag by Marty Neumeier. In it, he talks about how artists have the uncanny ability to see both the positive and negative spaces an object occupies. These negative, or "white spaces" are just as significant as the occupied spaces. He argues that, like artists, marketers should be on the lookout these "white spaces" that represent unmet needs. I'll give you an example...
  - White spaces give you the problems that frame your creative endeavors.
- **Disciplined:** This one might seem out of place with all of these other words, but even creativity needs some discipline. The creative process is one that solves problems and results in something useful. It's easy to stray so every once in a while, creativity needs to be reigned back in.
  - In his book Jamming, John Kao likens marketing to a musical jamming session, where group members create music together organically. In addition to this analogy, Kao uses another non-music analogy to explain the creative process, which is familiar to us all. He says that being creative is like participating in a conversation. You don't know exactly what you're going to say or how you're going to say it, but in order for it to work, both parties need to share a common language and social conventions. Then, by listening and responding, people can create an engaging, meaningful conversation together, on the fly. To me, this describes what creativity is all about: You need enough discipline that you can make it work and create something useful, but enough freedom so that you can react to what's going on in the environment and within your group.
- **Continuous:** Market needs and technology change quickly. We need to apply creativity all the time to keep up with these changes. Plus, the more you do it, the easier it is to be creative.
- **Process:** There's a purpose, beginning, middle, and end. Divergent thinking: Raising options; Incubation: considering options; Convergent thinking: selecting the best option.

- **Indispensable:** Why is it so important for us to be thinking seriously about creativity? For starters, creativity is not fluff; it's not something we should turn on and off when it's convenient for us. **Creativity is the process by which we remain relevant.** Kao defines it as, "the entire process by which ideas are generated, developed, and transformed into value." In fact, there's no greater or more urgent challenge for us librarians than to learn how to effectively harness our own innate creative talents so that we can continually develop competitive, inspiring services.

Now, if we take a look back over this list, my guess is that most of these words have negative connotations for you. I know some of them do for me! I hate argument! We need to reframe our thinking so that words like RISK and CHAOS excite, rather than intimidate us. If something is UNCERTAIN, we should say, "Bring it on!" Uncertainty means there's opportunities just waiting to be scooped up.

I said creativity is imperative. Let's look at some broad trends that make it imperative for us to become creative geniuses:

1. **Globalization:** There's a great deal of talk and concern over globalization, outsourcing, and changes in our economy as new competitors like China, India, and Brazil becoming more influential. Tom Friedman talks about this in his book, *The World is Flat*. In it, he contends that countries with more mature markets like ours will have to innovate to thrive. This NYT Book review sums it up saying, "People in advanced countries have to find ways to move up the value chain, to have special skills that create superior products for which they can charge extra."

So what does this have to do with libraries? Two things, I think: First is that our society is going to be increasingly called upon to use its creativity to remain competitive. As librarians, we have a role to play here in terms of education. Just as we help people with computer skills and resume writing skills, we should also explore how we can support our communities with creativity resources including hardware, software, and information resources. Second, we're not immune to market forces. I know of at least one local newspaper in Pasadena that outsourced its journalists, we may see some library functions being outsourced too (and I believe we already have seen some of this). The bottom line is that, just like every other organization in the US, we need to use our creativity to add value to the services we offer. It's not enough just to provide access; we need to find and fill in those white spaces in unique ways.

2. **Clutter:** These are some pictures from around my campus. You can't find a surface that lacks a poster, logo, flyer, or some sort of promotion. In Neumeier's *Zag* book, he cites clutter as THE major obstacle facing marketers because this kind of pollution causes people to tune out and ignore messages. We have to be pretty darn creative to cut through this mess and actually reach people.

3. **Consumer Generated Media:** Our patrons are out there generating all kinds of stuff like videos, advertisements, games, designs, and they want to share it with others. This

is such a big trend that a major trend site, TrendWatching.com has called this group Generation C. Here's an example of this trend in action [Uber site: <http://www.uber.com/kitchengoddess>].

Do we librarians have a role to play in capturing the intellectual output of our communities in this way? I think so! There's huge opportunity here! We've already been doing similar things by collecting oral histories and manuscripts, but what about the video games our teens design? What a great way to connect with our patrons, by making them the stars.

To take advantage of CGM, we need to not only understand creativity, and be able to nurture it in others, but we need to nurture it within ourselves to.

**4. Technology:** The backbone of creativity is diversity of perspectives and of seeking out new ideas and expertise. Today's technology allows us to communicate with virtually anyone worldwide. Just earlier this week, I had a librarian in Dublin, Ireland befriend me in Facebook because he read my blog and found a link to my profile. Imagine all the possibilities for collaboration and idea-sharing here. If we aren't using technology to beef up our creative muscles, we're just falling behind. Also, technology changes fast, and windows of opportunity to take advantage of it get smaller and smaller. Practicing creativity regularly can help us make the most of those small windows to devise innovative services.

I hope you're all at least somewhat sold in the need to be creative. But now we need to ask ourselves how to go about it. From what I've studied, I have some good news and some bad news:

The good news is: there's no magic tricks or complicated techniques for being creative. It takes some self-discipline and an adjustment in mindset, but everyone can do it fairly easily.

Ready for the bad news? The bad news is that you can't be creative solo. You need an organizational culture that will nurture you and where you can nurture others. In and of itself, this isn't bad news, but it can be bad if your organization is resistant to risk and change, and those other characteristics of creativity we've talked about.

Alright, on to how we can become more creative. If we were to construct a job ad to hire creative librarians, here are the kinds of required qualities we'd be looking for.

**Open minded:** An open-minded person has what Kao and others call a "Beginner's Mind," which essentially means clearing out the mind and ridding oneself of presumption and other baggage so that you can open yourself up to creativity.

In one of the great literary works of our time, *The Tao of Pooh* by Benjamin Hoff, Hoff talks about the beginner's mind this way [pg. 150, para. 2].

There are lots of ways to get yourself into this state. As this slide suggests, the best way is to force yourself to take a break from the problem you're thinking about and focus on something else. The Jamming book talks about a lot of techniques, but one I particularly liked was to pick up a random magazine. [Show magazine and insights gained.] Here's something else I do: [cake decorating!]

**Observant:** No, I mean really observant! How often do we fall into the same routines that we don't even pick up on what's going on around us (that's me on my way into work!). In marketing and consumer behavior, we talk about heuristics, or "rules of thumb" that people use when deciding whether or not to purchase something. These are "mental shortcuts" people take based on clues from the environment. Take a pack of M&M's. Do you really have to struggle over that purchase? No. In part, that's because it's a low-cost purchase, but also you already know what to expect. You know what the M&M's are going to look and taste like, you know they melt in your mouth not in your hand, and you know all this without even really thinking about it. This is fine when you're grocery shopping, but it poses problems when it comes to creativity because you begin to see what you expect to see. We have to stop ourselves from taking these shortcuts so that we don't miss something important while we're on autopilot. Remember, those white spaces are lurking everywhere!

This book was written by a woman who works at IDEO, a premier creative design firm. She's an expert in understanding the human side of product development, and in this book she prompts people to take a fresh look at those things they might otherwise ignore in their everyday environment and think about what they mean. In 1999, ABC Nightline did a piece on IDEO called the Deep Dive. In it, an IDEO team had to redesign the standard shopping cart in one week. To get started, they hit the grocery stores and talked to cart experts. Mostly, they just watched and listened. One observation I thought was brilliant was that the noted that people often pick up and "scootch" their carts over to make way for other shoppers. In their redesign, they fixed this problem by making wheels that would turn 90 degrees. You can read about IDEO's process in the Art of Innovation by Tom Kelley.

There's also a company in my town of Richmond, VA called Play, Inc. They're like IDEO and their motto is LAMSTAIH or, look at more stuff, think about it harder. They have a whole "red paper" on the topic that you can read. Looking and thinking about stuff is what allows people to make seemingly obvious creative leaps like the relationship between a falling apple and gravity.

But I would say that active observation and just being aware is THE MOST IMPORTANT way to come up with creative ideas.

While you're doing your observation, there are two other things you should be sure to do:

- **Keep a journal.** I didn't realize how important this was until I started keeping one at the recommendation of Paul Williams who has a creativity company called the Idea Sand box. I began keeping a journal about ideas for blog posts.

I'd keep a journal with me at all times and jot down thoughts that popped into my head. I noticed that when I referred back to my notes, I could more easily think of other ideas and build on those initial thoughts. **Sketch** things too.

- **Write a bug list.** Write down all the things about a service experience or product that bug you. These can be the jumping off points for creative problem-solving. If you need help, visit your local airport.

**Adventurous:** Try something different everyday! You need to collect experiences like some people collect coins or baseball cards. Every new experience you have allows you to make connections between problems and solutions. Kao calls this your "experience repertoire." Play recommends looking at analogous situations to break through old mental habits. But you need to have a toolkit of situations so that you can draw from to apply that tactic. Maybe start small by trying a new coffee drink, or go to an art museum, or change up some ingredients in your favorite stand-by recipes. Then, start going to new places and talk to new people.

**Team players:** Creativity happens in groups. Period. You can be creative on your own, but it's likely that something you read, or heard, or talked to someone about had something to do with your ideas. You also need to have a group that is diverse (experiences, expertise, etc.). There are a couple of ways I'd advise doing this:

1. **Brainstorm.** A lot of people think they're brainstorming when they're really not. It's much more than getting a bunch of people in a room and asking them to come up with as many ideas as they can. There are rules [ see bibliography]:

- \* Postpone and withhold your judgment of ideas
- \* Encourage wild and exaggerated ideas
- \* Quantity counts at this stage, not quality
- \* Build on the ideas put forward by others
- \* Every person and every idea has equal worth

You have to also start out with a problem. Let me share with you my first experience leading a formal brainstorming session...put people in groups; did a warm up; encouraged crazy ideas and gave prizes; analyze.

It's not all that easy. Two problems: my warm-up question was to think of a new reality TV show that has nothing to do with libraries. Most couldn't do that. Second: People weren't sure what to do with their ideas when they got back to their libraries.

2. **Advisory groups:** I have an undergraduate advisory committee. This is our 3<sup>rd</sup> year and I don't know how I'd do my work without them. At our last meeting, we talked about ways we could prevent vandalism and the conversation took on a life of it's own. We had tons of ideas including:

- Texting a security guard
- Making garbage cans large and bright yellow
- Putting little garbage cans under study carrels
- Painting the stairwells with chalkboard paint to give vandals a place to "vandalize"

- Have student organizations adopt sections of the library to keep clean

Technology lets you do this kind of thing online too. I interviewed a company called Vision Critical that runs online consumer panels using community features like online forums [ see bibliography].

**Thrill Seekers:** Need a high risk tolerance. In new product development, we talk about the “fuzzy front end” of new product design. It’s SUPPOSED to be fuzzy. We need institutions that encourage risk and support failures like they do successes. IDEO’s saying is, “**Enlightened trial and error succeeds over the planning of the lone genius.**” Others say, fail early and often. Maybe it’s just me, but I don’t hear this too often. On the “fuzzy front end” mistakes are cheap; not so when you implement a service.

**Fun-loving:** Not everything is fun, but you need to find the where the fun is in what we do to inspire creativity.

Also, need to think about user experiences and how to make them more enjoyable. Many retailers and service providers are thinking more and more about experiences as ways to differentiate themselves. Kelley’s book about IDEO has a whole chapter on this, but one thing he suggest is breaking services down into its component parts. Let’s think about this for a second:

**What would the ideal library visit be like?**

**What’s the more typical scenario?**

**How can we redesign the parts of the typical scenario so that it’s more like the ideal?**

Kelley suggests that creating good experiences usually means figuring out how to connect with people by telling stories, making experiences entertaining, and even making little improvements even on things that are inherently negative or mundane.

**Think it’s impossible? THINK AGAIN!!**

[Midnight Mammogram & Manicure](#)

“The idea came about as employees at Florida Radiology Imaging brainstormed for ways to celebrate Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October.”