Module: Brainstorming and Ideation

Key concepts and terms

Brainstorming: Brainstorming refers to a series of exercises to help see what currently exists, where there are gaps, and how those gaps reflect user needs. Brainstorming (sometimes referred to as product strategy or strategic thinking in the design world) is helpful in figuring out what your audience needs, what has resonated for them previously, or how there isn't a product, campaign, or movement that fits your audience.

Ideate: Ideation is a specific design and technology term that means to build on previously collected research, previous campaigns or movements or products, and push them in a brand new direction. Ideation is the human-centered design way to design with iteration.

CO/ACT

When to use this module

By now, you should have completed the ecosystem mapping, identifying a target audience, user personas, and user research and assumption testing modules. If you haven't completed at least three of the above modules, please stop, and do at least three of the previous modules before starting this module. You will need the outputs from the previous modules to complete this one.

At this point, you should have an idea of who your users are, what their needs are, and what currently exists in the technology or product landscape. Ideally, you will also start thinking about what doesn't serve your users.

This module expands on the information you have already gathered. The idea here is to go really wide with ideas: be prepared to throw away ideas or product concepts. Don't be scared of coming up with the wrong idea- you want to build and gain momentum, and work through all possible ideas (even ones that feel not very well thought out) to find the best few ideas for your users. Sometimes, the first idea a group or designer will have for a product may not be the BEST idea for their users, even if they know their user group really well.

We can use a variety of exercises to help think and create these new ideas. The following are suggestions on how to take all of the knowledge gathered from previous modules and start to shape those takeaways and thoughts into strategic products that best serve your users.

How to use it

- Time: about 1-2 hours
- Pens, paper, post it notes, markers
- Facilitator Responsibilities: The facilitator will be in charge of time management for the exercises, following instructions to direct the exercises, sorting the written out ideas that come out of the exercises, and then documenting the exercises (such as taking photos and notes). Note: the facilitator doesn't need a background in design, they just need to be comfortable following instructions to lead the exercises and documenting the group outputs for this module.
- This is a two part module with brainstorming exercises and selecting-the-best-idea, or sorting, exercises. Instructions for each exercise are below.
- Materials: Pens, paper, colored makers and post it-notes.
- This module is about using design thinking exercises to create new ideas. Using one or two or all of the following can be helpful in creating new insights into creating your product, service, or campaign.

HOW MIGHT WE'S:

"How Might We's" are helpful in thinking and creating multiple ideas about one topic. Each participant is given a stack of post it notes and a pen or pencil. For two minutes, each participant has to write as many questions stating "how might we...." about the chosen topic at hand. Then each participant reads their favorite top two, and the exercise starts again. The idea is to drill further and further into a problem.

Step-by-step:
1. The facilitator should first give an explanation and prompt by saying "Participants can start by internally asking themselves questions: How might we solve our users' needs? So write out those questions on your paper or post-it notes. But, then go further, how might we solve X (pick one of the things you've already written) and try to write down as many questions as possible related to that, going from the most broad "how might we solve users' poor security" to 'how might we solve issues with connectivity and losing a password.' One is more broad (generally poor security) and one is more narrow (connectivity and losing a password). Remember, don't try to write full paragraphs, just one sentence per idea."
2. Now, set a timer for 2 minutes, and tell everyone they have two minutes to write as many things as possible. Again, go broad and go narrow.
3. Stop! Now give everyone a second, and let them read over. Now, start the timer again for two minutes, and they write more and more ideas.
4. Stop! Now have everyone group their ideas (give them just two minutes) and go around the room and present their two favorite ideas. Now, place those ideas up on a wall.
5. Repeat the exercise one more time.
6. Share back top ideas.
7. Sort ideas into related groups (the participants should sort them and then name those groups). This activity can take anywhere from 5-15 minutes.

Remember, "How Might We's" are designed to take a problem and turn user choices into questions to help problem solve.

Let's work through an example: If we were focusing on voter turnout, a question we can ask is "how might we improve voting with X user group in X area?" If we go narrower, we can ask "how might we better update users about new candidates in their area" or "how might we better reach the public with timely information about elections"? These How Might We's go even deeper than "how might we improve voting."

IDEA SPEED DATING

Paper, pens
Idea speed dating is a fun and quick exercise to think through ideas, as a group.
1. The facilitator can either lay out a big piece of paper to cover the table or place large sheets of paper in front of each person, with a piece of paper in the middle displaying the 'topic.'
2. Next, the facilitator puts on music and for two minutes, each person writes about the topic at hand.
3. After two minutes, the music stops, and then everyone moves to their right.
4. The music starts again for two minutes, and each person now writes and adds to the previous person's page.
5. This continues a few more iterations.
6. The goal here is to build off of the previous ideas, so each person should be open and constructive. In this case, let's try to stick to problems that can be relatively solved, but out of the box ideas are also welcomed.

CRAZY 8S

Paper, pens
Crazy 8s is similar to Idea Speed Dating. With Crazy 8s, each participant should fold their sheet of paper in half, and in half again, to create 8 squares.
1. Each participant folds their own paper to create 8 squares.
2. The facilitator sets a timer for 8 minutes, and each participant should draw 8 different product ideas or thoughts into the 8 different squares, ideally spending 1 minute on each idea. This exercise will go fast, but that's okay, because the goal is to get ideas out of the participants head and onto the paper. As before, perfection isn't the key here.
3. Time's up! Now, each participant should share their sheet of paper, and receive feedback and questioning from the other participants.

HOW TO SORT THEM:
Now that the activities and exercises have been done, it's time to sort the results. The facilitator will tell everyone it's time to start dot voting.

Dot voting is when participants and the facilitator get to write a dot on the ideas they think are best. Each participant will get three votes or "dots." This exercise will help the group get a sense of the most popular ideas, without having to publicly deliberate. This is a great way to make sure everyone's voice is heard.

Questions you can ask to help decide is "is this an idea for right now?" "What does this idea or product look like in 5-10 years? "Should our product last longer than 5 years, what happens if something (society, politics, technology) changes or shifts?"

Once dot voting has commenced, the facilitator can read out all of the ideas that have been voted on, and count what are the most popular ideas. From here, then the group can start to debate around what are the ideas they want to focus on moving forward (note: it doesn't have to be the MOST popular idea, but this is a great to filter thoughts, and get people to think and choose and really be concise in their thinking).

I'm stuck...

Think through the following questions if you need a little inspiration:
1. Does this suggestion fit our users' needs?
2. Are we already imagining a finished product? If so, is this product clouding our judgement?
3. Is the product idea grounded in the user research? Am I listening to my users or making assumptions about their needs?
4. What are all of the users' needs, from the most benign to the most extreme?
5. (select a user need) how might we change this or improve it?
6. (take the same user need) what happens if one aspect of our product changes? What does it do to this user need?
7. (take the same user need) If a political situation changes in this user's home country, how does this change the context of them using our product?
8. What are 'edge cases' for our product? Are these edge cases called by a product or a lack of product?
9. Can we map edge cases into a user story?

Don't forget!

Inclusion Tip: As you are ideating, remember that your target audience is not uniform. How is your idea going to cater to the needs of individuals with and without disabilities such as people who are blind or have low vision for example?

Reminder, perfection isn't the point of this module. This module is supposed to be a bit messy, and a little hacky. This is about brainstorming, and also putting together all of the knowledge participants have previously gathered together. Strategic ideation is about prototyping, so in the next few modules, participants can refine, and deepen critique and work on and build out the idea that was created in this module. This isn't about the finished idea, this module is just the first few ideas. So, be prepared to throw ideas away.

Pens, paper, post it notes, pencils- all things to physically sketch and write out are important.

What's next?

Congratulations on coming up with some great ideas! Now that you've selected your top few, move on to the "Rapid Prototyping and Usability Testing" module.