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PRODUCING UNREASONABLE RESULTS

Connect the Dots

Here's the real secret to coming up with creative ideas. **BY BILL STANTON**

IN EVERY INDUSTRY, the company with the next great idea wins.

That means, of course, that in *your* industry, the company with the next great idea wins. The only question is, will that be you, or will it be your competition?

And that brings us to our second question. (I know I said the above question was the only question. I lied. Get over it.) If the company with the next great idea wins, then where do great ideas come from? And since “great ideas” are also “creative ideas,” our question becomes, “Where do creative ideas come from?”

During my 15 years as executive producer of the comedy TV show *Almost Live!*, it was my privilege to work with some of the most creative people in Seattle. For 15 years, our job was to come up with creative ideas, *on demand, every week*. When it came to observing the creative process, week in and week out, I had the best seat in the house. And if I had to boil down everything I learned about creativity into one sentence, it would be this: Creativity is almost entirely about connecting dots.

Creativity is about seeing relationships that other people don't see. It's almost never about inventing something out of thin air. Instead, creativity is the spark that ignites when two or more divergent ideas collide. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Halfway through our fourth season, a TV program called *Cops* debuted on Fox. You probably know the show. A camera crew follows real police officers during patrols, chases and arrests. This usually takes place in some high-profile city like Miami, Los Angeles or Atlanta. So what did we do? We simply connected

two seemingly unrelated dots—the TV show *Cops* and the city of Kent, Washington—to come up with *Cops in Kent*. Did the show *Cops* already exist? Sure did. Did the city of Kent already exist? Sadly, yes. (Citizens of Kent, I'm just joking. We have nothing but love and respect for you. Mostly.) So we didn't really invent anything new. We just found a connection that nobody had thought of yet.

So if you want your company to be the one with the next great idea, you need to connect dots that the competition wouldn't think to connect.

On another occasion, somebody (probably *Almost Live!* host John Keister) had been watching an old Bruce Lee movie. During the movie, somebody's arm or leg or head got chopped off. In a classic understatement, John said, “That's just rude.” That sparked an idea: What if a kung fu expert was also intolerant of rude behavior? And, just for grins, what if he also had severe anger management problems? And so *Mind Your Manners with Billy Quan* was born. Again, a wonderfully creative idea that came from connecting the until-then-unconnected dots of kung fu and etiquette.

So if you want your company to be the one with the next great idea, you need to connect dots that the competition wouldn't think to connect. And to do this, you need to look at dots that the competition isn't looking at. And to do *that*, you should probably be looking at dots outside your own industry.

Looking within your industry—for

example, looking at what your successful competitors are doing—can certainly lead to improvement. But “improvement” is not the same as “radical, blow-the-competition-away breakthrough.” For this, you need to look elsewhere. It's really a three-step process:

1. Find a company or organization *outside your industry* that's producing successful, breakthrough results.

2. Determine what it is that they're doing to produce those results. Do not think about your own business or industry when doing this! All you're doing here is figuring out what's working for them, in their industry.

3. For every answer you came up with in Step 2, ask, “How could I incorporate that idea into my business?”

This is what connecting dots looks like. Is it easy? Not at first. But it does get easier with practice. Spending 15 years working with John Keister doesn't hurt, either. **SB**

29 -TIME EMMY AWARD winner Bill Stainton works with, and speaks for, organizations that want their people to play a bigger game and produce unreasonable results. For booking inquiries, please contact Jeff Jacob at Jeff@BillStainton.com, or call 615-974-0225.