How to Aid the Ideation Process:
The All-Too-Common Problem
(and what we did about it)

White Paper Series

TRC
Consumer **Insights**.
Market **Innovations**.

Many new product development professionals want to generate ideas in partnership with consumers. We know that the gold standard of that are methods such as ideation work sessions, co-creators think groups, online communities.

Way too often though, there is not enough time or budget to do it right. Instead, marketers go with gut feel or have to lean on traditional anecdotal "quick qual". We wanted to offer a better solution.

Our goal was to bring quantitative rigor to the ideation process even when budgets are tight and timelines short. So we came up with a solution that we call Idea Mill™. It's a way to jump start ideation with consumer feedback, and to quantitatively screen out less attractive ideas in a single, affordable step.

Part I - So How Does It Work?

Idea Mill™ is a tournament-style approach that asks people to make choices, rather than asking them to rate each idea on a scale. As experts in Choice Methods, we know that ratings don't yield sufficient differentiation as much as tournament-style choice approaches.

We work with 400 respondents, a number which we determined via internal testing that is sufficient to generate a large number of ideas, and to be able to quantitatively evaluate them. And it's just about

right to stay within an affordable figure, such as $10K.

Idea Mill™ is a 4-step method that is able to combine ideation and evaluation into one process.

1. Seeds to stimulate

You begin by offering 6 "seeds", or starter ideas to establish the framework of the process and stimulate brainstorming. These can be anything – off-the-cuff suggestions, old ideas that keep cropping up, even concepts already in the works.

2. Evaluate and suggest

The first 50 respondents are asked to evaluate and choose among the 6 starter ideas and inspire them to come up with their own idea. Additional evaluation criteria include creativity, originality,

empowerment and "social spread" – or how likely respondents are to share the product news with their friends.

3. Evaluate the larger pool and suggest again

The next batch of respondents evaluates all the ideas generated so far. And then again each respondent makes a contribution with his/her suggestion.
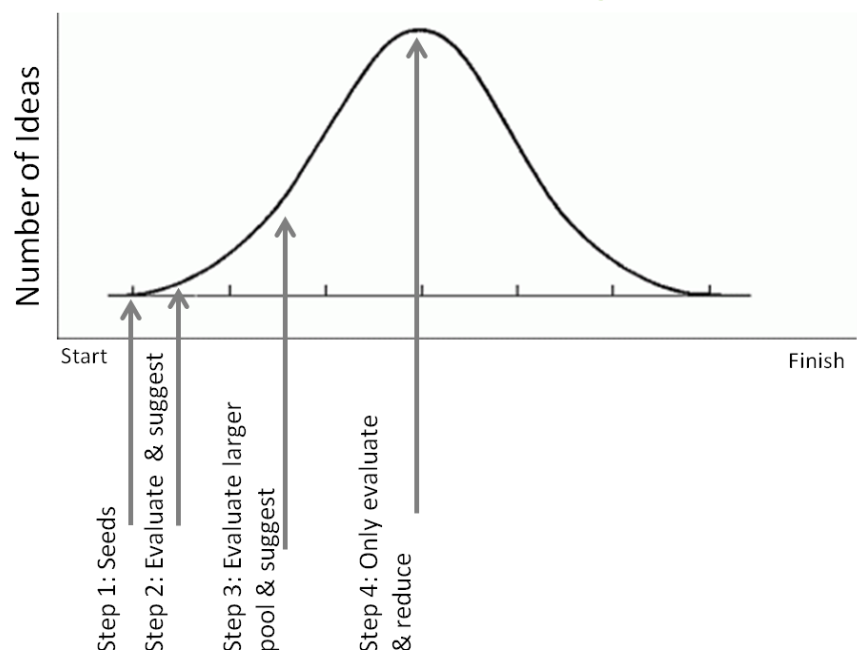
4. Only evaluate and reduce to top 20

The last group of respondents focuses on rating, not generating their own ideas. They evaluate all the ideas provided by the early participants. Idea Mill's advanced algorithm eliminates ideas that are not resonating and quickly zeros in on the top 20.

Idea Mill™ Process in 4 Steps

Number of Ideas

Start   Finish

Step 1: Seeds
Step 2: Evaluate & suggest
Step 3: Evaluate larger pool & suggest
Step 4: Only evaluate & reduce

A 3-strike rule winnows bad ideas, even as new ideas join the pool. The rule states that if an idea loses three times, it's taken away from being presented again.

Using Game Mechanics to Inspire Creativity

Our proprietary gaming technique called Smart Incentives™ is used in the study to motivate respondents to work harder with the goal to deliver ideas that are more elaborate and thought-out. Gaming techniques are proven to improve respondents' engagement and focus, which are essential when asking them questions that require creative thinking. In our case respondents are stimulated because their ideas are judged by others and because they obtain a monetary reward.

Part II – Idea Mill™ Compared to Current Fallback Options

The main advantage of this approach is its quantitative benefit, done efficiently. [See table 1]. Essentially, one no longer needs two studies, one for idea generation and the other for idea evaluation. The goal can now be accomplished with one. The approach is also superior to quick qualitative or "open-ended" inquiries.

Table 1

		Idea Mill™	Quick Qual	Open-ended Questions
Idea Generation	"Seeds" Ideas	✓	✓	–
	Volume of Ideas	200	Minimal	Minimal
Idea Evaluation	Tournament-style evaluation and winnowing	✓ Quant	Anecdotal	–
	Idea "diagnostics"	✓ Quant	Anecdotal	–

Part III – In Conclusion

Of course, there is no substitute for conducting in-depth ideation workflow and its related processes. However, that's not often feasible due to time and budgetary constraints. And the need to generate new ideas during early new product development process doesn't go away.

One option is to proceed with anecdotal 'quick qual' approach or to employ open-ended questioning to try to get ideas from consumers. But we believe it's better to blend qual with quant and to leverage game mechanics and rewards in a single, more rigorous step. Even better, this can typically be accomplished in less than 10 days for under $10K.