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Can innovation games really help you do serious work in healthcare?

Written by Andrea Simon, PhD, Founder/CEO, Simon Associates Management Consultants | August 19, 2014

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The answer is a resounding "Yes!"

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With all the pressure these days on healthcare administrators to realign their organizations fast and often in order to thrive, or even just survive, perhaps what is needed is to "play" a little more. Serious play, using proven, insight-producing [Innovation Games®](#), is one of the best ways we have found to help all levels of staff generate new ideas and convert them into great innovations.

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For instance, one of our healthcare clients engaged us to help rebrand her hospital. In a time of great change in the marketplace, senior management needed to establish the hospital's modern identity and find a way to stand out if it was ever going to acquire and then retain market share.

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Another client in the health information management arena asked us to help reimagine her brand and reposition it for a changing business environment. Her healthcare clients were in the process of restructuring the entire health information market space — one where she had always been a leading player. How could her company retain its status now?

Both cases reflect what many healthcare organizations face today. The speed of change is creating a crisis requiring top-notch innovation — not just the front-end of idea generation, but the back-end of execution, as well. Rather than continuing to perform the old standardized routines, companies now need to generate creative, innovative solutions that will attract and delight customers. Now more than ever, it's time for new, fresh, smart solutions.

Where do you find those new ideas?

The challenge is that there is a universe of new ideas awaiting us if only we have a way to capture them into impactful innovations. The solution? Playing games. Not simply "playful" or silly exercises, — games that have structure to them. We call these "Innovation Games," designed by Luke Hohmann and modified by us with other games from the cognitive sciences that help people discover their untapped creativity.

Why games? As the neurosciences have proven, the randomness of games fools the brain and lets it see things in new ways. Games also help us imagine better solutions: new brand stories, new products or services that will solve consumers' problems, new ways businesses can expand into an unexplored market.

Clients often ask us, "Where do those ideas come from?" What we have found is that they come to you by looking in places where you normally don't pay much attention. You might pick up a great idea by looking across different industries, not just within the one you know so well. Or, that big idea might be sitting in the unmet needs of a different market segment than the one you currently focus on. Go play in a different sandbox, you might say.

So can playing games work in the healthcare industry? Yes!

Innovation Games are particularly successful at helping healthcare professionals generate the germs of ideas that will eventually showcase what's new and most impressive about their institution — what differentiates it from all of the other options. This is what will attract new users, delight them and then encourage them to return.

For our healthcare clients, we typically use a range of games including: Reverse Assumption Exercises, Story Board, Build a Product Box and Remember the Future. Stories captured through these games lead participants to core elements of their hospital's brand, both as it is today and as it is evolving. They also reveal their organization's personality, which will be the primary driver of consumers choosing it over alternatives.

When the games are completed, the "players" have an entirely new vision for their institution and the beginnings of

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new services and products for their clients. Let me tell you, it's exciting to watch.

Innovation Games can work for any company, no matter the industry

Here are some things to think about if you want to generate new, innovative ideas:

- Imagine bringing in a variety of people and watching them "build" your business in the form of a box. By playing Build a Product Box, they build your product or service and then sell it to you. Seeing how they do this brings previously unimagined insights into how you could go about your business differently.
- For a healthcare system that has invested a great deal in the design of a service line, could an Innovation Game help reduce or eliminate features or functionality that don't add value for customers? Streamlining is key.
- How about challenges among the current staff of a hospital? For instance, new systems that aren't working or new quality improvement practices that aren't taking hold. Could games produce employee engagement and encourage them to embrace the changes instead of ignoring them?

As you can see, these games really do get people thinking, which leads to new ideas and actionable results...often the difference between conquering the future and fading into irrelevancy.

So yes, serious play to do serious work really works.

Andrea Simon, PhD, principal and founder of [Simon Associates Management Consultants](#), has over 20 years' experience as a senior executive with healthcare and financial services institutions. Ms. Simon's expertise lies in helping companies and non-profit institutions develop their brand positioning, redesign their organization's culture and improve their financial performance through innovative and effective product development and marketing.

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