

Six steps to better concepts: ACH and the dangers of 'satisficing'

Progress in science and technology has changed our lives dramatically. Yet the scientific method is based on rejecting, rather than confirming, ideas. The negative as opposed to the positive.

 By Sid Peimer 8 Mar 2005

As marketers, we have little time for naysayers - we would rather pick an idea that looks appealing and then find all the available info to support it. If you're looking for evidence of this, merely add up all the books you have read that do not support your point of view. If greater than 1, you are unusual.

The result of a brainstorm is usually a short-list of a few concepts on a flipchart, and then, after some linear process, we choose the winning idea. This process is called satisficing strategy and is one of the reasons the Germans lost the war.

The Allies in World War 2 had a number of notable intelligence successes: analysing German propaganda; predicting German submarine movements and estimating German air power. What makes it so interesting what the researcher Frank Stech discovered concerning the intellectual processes and methods used - it was ACH.

ACH, or the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses, was originally proposed by Richards J. Heuer - seasoned CIA analyst and author. Although ACH permits a more systematic and objective evaluation of information, has one drawback - it entails more cognitive strain - not a great business tool in a world where the short-cut is revered. However, Heuer proposes an 8-step process (for the serious analyst), which I have further refined into a 6-step process for those who merely wish to use it for concept generation (as opposed to the analysis of data for national security).

Adapted ACH for concept generation

1. Collect more concepts than you did before
2. Make an argument for and against each concept
3. Prepare a matrix: concepts along the top and attributes down the side
4. Do the opposite of what comes naturally: try to discredit concepts - why they won't work
5. Find the key concepts/pattern of the information in your matrix. Connect pieces of information - a picture should emerge.
6. Only THEN formulate your concept.

So, next time you're sitting around the table, and all you can hear is the ticking of the CD's Rolex, suggest little ACH. Just don't mention the war.

Source: This article is based on Richards J. Heuer, Jr's *The Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*. The entire ebook can be downloaded [here](#).

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