

5 Creative Approaches To The Obvious & 5 Tests Of Obviousness

By Robert R. Updegraff - 1953

"Whenever I travel around the world, I'm often asked the same question: "What are your favorite books? Well, I'm going to let you in on a secret. The best book that I have ever read on marketing is one that was written 90 years ago, in 1916."

- Jack Trout (Forbes Magazine 11.24.2006)

FIVE CREATIVE APPROACHES TO THE OBVIOUS

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1. ***What is the simplest possible way of doing it?*** Never mind *how* a thing has always been done, or *how* other people want to do it.

Strip off all the accumulated ideas, practices, methods, techniques, and traditions. If a seven-year-old boy were tackling the problem for the first time, uninhibited by the experience of generations, how would he be likely to proceed?

2. ***Suppose the whole thing were to be completely reversed?***

Nothing opens the mind wider to a new approach than to ask oneself this bold question. The fact that a thing has been done or made a certain way for centuries is likely to mean that it is ripe for challenge. Perhaps *reversing* it in some respect will turn out to be utterly obvious.

Ernest G. Stout used this same reverse technique when he designed the revolutionary Convair Sea Dart, a jet-powered plane that can take off from the water. For nearly 40 years, designers had attempted—unsuccessfully—to create a boat with wings. The seaplane had been relegated to oblivion. Then Stout got an inspiration. Instead of designing a boat that could fly, he set out to create a *plane* that could *float*, a plane that became one of the most remarkable aircraft.

3. ***Can a vote be taken on it, or the public's help actively enlisted?***

Too many business decisions are made in the office instead of out where life is going on. Very often some simple test, with a group of people or a cross section of the public, will develop the obvious preference, or the obvious way of doing, making, or saying something. Since it is the public which makes or breaks us in everything we attempt to do, it seems utterly obvious to check our plans against a segment of the public, before going too far.

4. ***What opportunity is being overlooked because no one has bothered to develop it?*** In almost everything we use in our daily lives there is an opportunity for improvement – often so completely obvious that it should shame us not to have seen it.

Benjamin Franklin, bothered by the need for two pairs of spectacles, one for looking at things nearby, and another for seeing things at a distance, developed bifocal spectacles, which have been a boon to humanity. Nothing could be more obvious.

5. ***What are the special needs of the situation?*** Often the situation itself dictates its own specification, or presents some special – but overlooked – opportunity for improvement.

The Hartford brothers with their cash-and-carry idea, Woolworth with his original limited-price store, the inventor of the ball-point pen that does away with the ink problem, were all creatively obvious.

The world is full of unexpressed, unsensed needs, waiting for men or women who will bring obviousness to bear on the unsolved problems of everyday living. *They will be richly rewarded!*

The more original a discovery, the more obvious it seems afterwards.

– Arthur Koestler

There is nothing as deceptive as an obvious fact.

– Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Familiar things happen and mankind does not bother about them. It takes a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious.

-- Alfred North Whitehead

FIVE TESTS OF OBVIOUSNESS

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1. ***The problem when solved will be simple.*** The obvious is nearly always simple -- so simple that sometimes a whole generation of men and women have looked at it without even seeing it.
2. ***Does it check with human nature?*** If you feel comfortable in explaining your idea or plan to your mother, wife, relative, neighbors, your barber and anyone else you know, it's obvious. If you don't feel comfortable, it probably is not obvious.
3. ***Put it on paper.*** Write out your idea, plan or project in words of one or two syllables, as though you were explaining it to a child. If you can't do this in two or three short paragraphs and the explanation becomes long, involved or ingenious--then very likely it is not obvious.
4. ***Does it explode in people's minds?*** If, when you have presented your plan, project or program, do people say, "Now why didn't we think of that before?" You can feel encouraged. Obvious ideas are very apt to produce this "explosive" mental reaction.
5. ***Is the time ripe?*** Many ideas and plans are obvious in themselves, but just as obviously "out of time." Checking time lines is often just as important as checking the idea or plan itself.

"These five principles are worth a thousand books on marketing, mine included." - Jack Trout (Author of *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*)