Think Different
By Ken Cooper

In a recent New Yorker cartoon, several businessmen in dark suits sat around a conference table. The caption read: "Sounds good. We’ll just have to run it by the Hawaiian Shirts.” Humorous yet true. Increasingly, businesses of all kinds, including printers and publishers, are defined not only by what they produce but also by how they think. And that thinking had better be innovative.

Creatives, such as designers, writers, illustrators and photographers, have always been a part of the printing and publishing industries, albeit safely sequestered in their own cubicles. Today, however, creative thinking isn’t just the domain of designers. It’s essential for everyone, from top management to the pressroom. The innovation mindset must transcend cubicles and silos, touching each activity, including management, editorial, customer relations and production.

Think of the innovation mindset as a world view for an alternate universe. In this new innovative world, natural laws do not apply. There are no boxes and glasses are always half full. The term “innovation mindset” might seem to be a subjective and fuzzy concept, especially for those from the worlds of print manufacturing and quality control. But the innovation mindset can be defined and its principles taught and practiced with tangible benefits for left and right-brainers alike.

Here are some key components of the innovation mindset with applications for the printing and publishing industries:

CHANGE

If innovators were philosophers, they might postulate, “I change, therefore, I am.” To the innovator, change is normal and good. It is the vehicle of opportunity. Innovators seek it. Indeed, they lead it. Therefore, when faced with recent tectonic shifts in the printing and publishing industries, innovators would smile in anxious anticipation, certain of the numerous opportunities that change inevitably brings.

Back home in our everyday working environment, change might not be so welcome. Change can be upsetting, even painful. David Rock, author of “Your Brain at Work,” cited medical evidence showing that negative emotions actually heighten the pain response in the brain. Negative emotions, like fear and dread, subconsciously heighten our resistance to change, as if to avoid an electrical shock. The printing and publishing industries have been jolted repeatedly, rendering them increasingly reluctant to ever touch the light switch again.

The printing industry in a way mirrors the steel industry. Steel manufacturing was an expensive and complex process that relied on economies of scale to offset the high cost of production. Then, when the mini-mill was introduced, steel became profitable again as smaller, more agile foundries produced custom products in lesser quantities, with much higher efficiency and lower overhead. Mini-mills were resisted at first but now they are the norm. It’s been said that it’s OK to fall in love with what you do, but not with how you do it.

Change can be scary, but denial is even scarier. Don’t look backward at the “good old days.” Instead, embrace the “good old days” yet to come. “The Great One,” Wayne Gretzky, once said, “A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.”

THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING — OK, NOT EVERYTHING

Innovators welcome change. Certain things, however, should not change. Like a kite soaring in the summer wind, innovators are free to follow their creative zephyrs. However, even kites aren’t entirely free; they remain tethered to the ground or else they are lost. Because innovation is a team sport, we need common ground.

Our first anchor is our mantra. Guy Kawasaki, former Apple evangelist and founder of Alltop.com, encourages trashing mission statements in favor of mantras. Mantras are short and meaningful, like a battle cry. They help us create culture and focus on a common mission. Apple’s “Think Different” slogan is a good example. What value do you really bring? Think in terms of customer value, not products. Boil it down to a mantra.

Our second anchor is values. David Allen, author of “Getting Things Done,” keeps a shared list of values on his company server titled: “We are at our best when…” Pragmatically, he notes that the important thing doesn’t seem to be what they are...
but simply that you have them and that everyone knows what they are. Values help set the ground rules so that we are free to focus on the main thing: providing value for the customer. Employees at Zappos, for instance, view themselves as customer service experts who also happen to sell shoes.

Lastly, there is the anchor of existing resources. The best innovations are those derived from the resources you already have, especially your knowledge and expertise. Carefully examine the business and markets you are already in, searching for untapped opportunities.

RESOURCES
Innovation is not a zero-sum game. In a zero-sum game, when one player wins, the others lose by an equal amount. When all of the resources have been exhausted, there are no more. The innovator, however, believes that resources can be created, and he or she does it a lot. I’m not talking about re-engineering or optimization of existing workflows, both of which have been preached to the printing and publishing industries for decades. I’m talking about reconfiguring existing resources in new ways and in accordance with the new reality to create new value.

A great example of innovation generating new resources is the creative use of QR codes. As described in the March/April 2011 Idealliance Bulletin, QR codes have transformed the static resource of ink on paper into dynamic, interactive media. Without the QR code, it’s simply printed matter. With the code, it’s an endless world of creative and commercial possibilities. Don’t stop there, use the same innovative mindset to generate new value from your other products and services!

PEOPLE
Some might view innovation as a thing. It might mean newer and better tools or some technological breakthrough. Although innovation might involve those things, innovation is fundamentally a process carried out by people through collaboration, whose purpose is to add customers and increase revenues. Therefore, because it is a group activity, innovation must be translated into culture. Shared tools and processes should be established in order for innovation to proceed in an ongoing and systematic manner. Furthermore, voices both inside and outside of the organization should be heard and respected.

“W” QUESTIONS
Asking “W” questions can be helpful to gain perspective when momentum is lacking. Here are some examples:

What is the customer’s real problem? What value do we bring? Which resources can be reconfigured to provide new value to the customer? Which unexpected successes or failures have we observed? What new knowledge can we use to create new value?
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And, most importantly, Why?

Questions can be pesky. Some might prefer to stop talking and just get to work. However, the benefits of asking plenty of “W” questions are well worth the effort, far outweighing any perceived inconvenience.

**TRENDS**

Innovators study their present world so they can better understand the future. Present trends become tomorrow’s reality. Here are a few significant trends for printers and publishers:

The traditional media model is history. We live in the era of transmedia. The premedia acronym “ROOM” stands for “rip once, output many.” A page may be processed once and then output on numerous devices. Transmedia, likewise, means that one story can be created and then told through a variety of communication channels using an array of techniques, many of them borrowed from multimedia.

Printers should not think of printing as a standalone product but rather as a critical component of the communications mix. Publishers, likewise, must see their original content in relation to the larger mix and better yet, deliver their own mix to their customers.

Publishing is no longer the sole domain of the publisher. Brands are getting into the act, too, even producing print publications to serve their established online communities. Yes, digital is driving demand for print.

Because so many new players are entering the publishing arena, printers and publishers who have valued expertise and transferrable knowledge to share can discover opportunities in custom publishing. Like the steel industry before it, established lines of production are giving way to custom solutions.

What do publishers have in common with museums and libraries? Curation. Museums and libraries excel at picking through the artifacts of human existence to showcase the meaningful and relevant. Similarly, because the digital signal-to-noise ratio is mind-numbing, many publishers are providing their readers with a diverse mix of trusted content, selected especially for them. Apple’s iPad is, after all, a custom content delivery device that also plays the game Angry Birds. Curation applications like Flipboard, Instapaper, News.me and the iPad version of The Orange County Register provide a glimpse into the future of publishing, serving hand-mixed “playlists” tailored to the reader’s preferences. The staff of The Huffington Post, for example, produces a winning mix of original stories, postings from select blogs and other curated content. Increasingly, readers will look to trusted partners who can help make sense of it all.

The extended forecast for the printing industry might not be nearly as dreary as some have reported. The proliferation of digital media has had the unintended side-effect of positioning print as a fresh, new alternative. In fact, print is cool. The British indie rock group Radiohead, for instance, recently released its latest album, “Newspaper,” accompanied by a large bag brimming with loads of printed art. Print is classic and trusted, and it still confers a level of credibility that ephemeral digital cannot.

Finally, innovation is not always product-related. Some of the most effective and profitable innovations can be new processes or business models.

This is a time of great opportunity for graphics communicators and publishers. Is your glass half empty or half full? For those with the innovation mindset, it’s always half full.