

Brainstorm: A Fictional Case

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Ten people were sitting around the agency's conference room table. Too many, I thought. What brought them here was brainstorming for a long-time insurance client with a variable annuity product, called EPIC, the client wanted publicized. Al, Elly, Bill, Sandra and Dave were on the left side of the table. Pete, Summer, Chastain, April and Lillian were on the right side. They had divided themselves by department – left side, financial communications and right side, marketing.

I handed out the single sheet description of EPIC – a variable annuity with a couple of twists that would soon be emulated by 50 other insurers' policies. I had called for a brainstorming since all efforts to publicize EPIC, even with a matte release service, had failed. Reporters weren't interested in annuities and when they did write about them, they swept 10 to 15 policies into one article without differentiation. I could hardly blame them. One annuity was nearly the same as the next. But, the client was pressing.

"Please read the paper. Ask me any questions then we'll begin."

Al flipped the paper on to the table. He knew the product. The rest of the financial communications group read quickly and were ready. The marketing group began asking questions about premiums, returns, portfolios and payouts. I noticed Al rolling his eyes – not a good start. I explained annuities quickly, but it was clear that Pete didn't understand the advantages and risks. I glanced at my watch. Five minutes had passed of a 45-minute session.

"Do the best you can," I said to the marketing people. I sat down at my laptop linked to a large screen at the front of the room. "Who would like to start?"

Silence.

"OK," I said. "Let me begin. We could create an interactive graph on the web where one can compare returns based on portfolio choices." I started to type.

Al snorted. "Past performance is not indicative of future results."

"Al, remember that you are not to criticize during a brainstorming. Do you have a better idea?"

"Yeah. Resign the account." Al grinned sardonically.

I typed that onto the screen and put "AL" in caps next to it. "Just so everyone can see your bright idea." Al cackled then fell silent.

“Pete?”

Pete was excitable, an optimist who spewed thoughts when he was on, most of which were useless, but one or two that were creative. Pete said slowly, “I like the idea of money when you need it after retirement. Not sure what to do with it, though. Maybe a comparison between an individual with a fixed annuity and one with a variable?”

I typed that into the screen. “Thanks, Pete. Good idea.” It wasn’t, but I had to remain relentlessly positive and extract what I could.

Chastain brightened. “What if we ask people on the street what they know about annuities and give prizes to those who answer correctly? Maybe we can create the EPIC Financial Quiz Man.”

“That’s interesting, and get him into the media?”

“Sure. We could make him outrageous, dress him in a dollar sign.”

The group chuckled. Even Al seemed amused.

“We’d need a comedian or someone like that whom we could train.”

I was typing quickly now and making mistakes.

Sandra spoke up. “People are serious about money.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m not sure. I’m just wondering if we should use a financial expert who cracks jokes but can be serious at the same time.”

“A comedian accountant? A clown actuary?” Al was back to snarkiness.

“Al.” Al fell silent again. He thought the brainstorming was ridiculous.

“Chastain has a good idea. Anyone else?” I scanned the group. “Lillian?” She shook her head. “Dave?”

“What if we sponsored an annuity contest?”

“Such as...”

“Five reasons why an annuity is better for your retirement portfolio.”

Summer chimed in. “What if we do a count-down like Letterman?”

“The more ridiculous the better?”

“Why not? It will build awareness.”

Ideas were rolling up the screen.

“What if the client wants to stay serious? What might we do then?” The marketing group looked lost.

“We could do a database of annuity comparisons – a definitive, EPIC database on annuities.” Elly liked database studies based on her past in IT.

“Like a 100 row, 25 column matrix?”

“Sure. It would take time but everyone could use it – agents, media. Put a front end on it in which one enters lifestyle and finances and the right policy spits out.”

“Uhuh. How do we differentiate EPIC?”

“We don’t. EPIC is suitable for a high-income earners, and it’s the same as MetLife, Hancock and MassMutual.”

“Hancock’s policy is not as flexible,” Al said.

I keyboarded the idea.

“We’re dealing with 50 flavors of vanilla.” Bill said.

“Yes, but an annuity is still a product for those who want guaranteed income till they die.” Sandra replied.

“Who wants to think about death?”

“Real Life, Real Answers,” said April, referring to a John Hancock advertising campaign.

“So?” Bill was trying not to be confrontational but he couldn’t help himself.

“So, Hancock ads have been effective in raising issues and getting people to pay attention.”

“Then, why don’t we do a series of cases about what happened to people who failed to save for retirement?” Bill looked as if he had struck gold.

“Why not YouTube videos with children who supported indigent parents? We could merchandise those to consumers and media.” Lillian was the social media expert.

“We could use the financial expert to crack jokes about annuities on YouTube,” I said. “Wait a moment. Let me catch up.” I typed furiously before air went out of the room.

My watch showed 20 minutes remaining, and they hadn’t found anything that differentiated EPIC.

“What could we do to set EPIC apart?”

“EPIC fail,” Al quipped.

“We can create an epic about annuities on YouTube – The Annuity EPIC, an educational approach.” Lillian was stuck on YouTube.

“What about an animation – cartoon characters? Snoopy? Like MetLife?” Pete had re-entered the conversation. “We could have a geezer with a long beard in a rocking chair telling the EPIC of his life, and how he lives a fun retirement because he has a guaranteed income. Send him rock climbing, BASE jumping, helicopter skiing, planking. A bucket list of wild activities because he has income with EPIC.”

I typed it in.

“Why don’t we just skip publicity and do a social media campaign – Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blog?” Sandra had been quiet, but her idea offered promise.

“What kind of content?”

“EPIC Financial Quiz man, personal stories on Facebook of successful retirement versus failure, that sort of thing.”

“Quiz man could tweet several times a day – one-liners.” Pete was warmed up.

“I like it. Let’s focus for the rest of the session on EPIC and social media. Here’s what I would like you to do.” I told them about group passing. Each would write an idea of how to use social media to publicize EPIC in a sentence or two then hand the sheet of paper clockwise to the next person. When the sheets had gone all the way around, I would collect them. There were looks of dismay but the group obliged.

For 15 minutes, there were scribbling, pencil tapping, a giggle or two, a loud guffaw, the rustle of papers.

“Time’s up.”

“Wait. We’re not done yet.”

Papers were handed more quickly to one another. Ten minutes passed. One by one they put pencils down and passed their sheets to me. I thanked them. The brainstorming was over.

“Next time let’s do this electronically.”

“Get me the system and I will.”

Idea review went as expected. Most were unworkable. Some were paths that had been tried. EPIC Financial Quiz Man stood out. We shortened his moniker to EPIC man. Some wanted a cartoon character. Others opted for a financial planner and comedian. There was no budget for animation, so I went with a spokesperson-comedian.

The client was lukewarm. She saw no humor in annuities, and didn’t want EPIC to be associated with mockery of the elderly. I painted a scenario – how EPIC man would be filmed before audiences and placed on YouTube, how he would Tweet daily, how he would use the news feed on Facebook and blog about retirement issues. The client agreed to a Facebook page, Twitter and a 10-market spokesperson tour. EPIC man became EPIC woman when we discovered a financial planner who did stand-up comedy and who related well to interviewers and audiences.

For the first six months of the campaign, social media following was well below where I wanted it to be but it was rising. YouTube views reached 100,000. EPIC woman’s Facebook fans were 25,000, and Twitter followers reached 5,000. EPIC woman was making personal appearances on local TV, radio and was interviewed by personal finance columnists. She was funny and appealing, and she fit the EPIC message nicely into her shtick. The client liked her.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Are some products unsuitable for PR?
2. How should brainstormings be conducted? Was this one done correctly?
3. Would you have removed AI from the brainstorming?
4. Should the marketing department have been in the brainstorming?
5. What would you have done?