

# Coming up with great ideas needn't hurt

By [Jonathan Stilwell](#)

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So, you need to crack a brilliant idea for an ad? Something you'd be proud to put in your party, which might even garner an award or two? The good news is that you don't have to be super-talented.

You do however have to be super enthusiastic. This enthusiasm can take many forms, and when channelled in the right direction, it can result in ker- ching.

## Starting ideas

I've found that one of the best ways to approach a creative problem is to immerse myself in it. By this I mean total immersion.

First, put the problem in your head. Let's say it's a radio ad for a multivitamin tablet. Don't think of a solution yet, just the problem. A radio ad for a multivitamin tablet. Now go about your daily business. Making a cup of tea in the kitchen. Skinnering to your colleagues on the balcony. Picking up stompies in the canteen at lunchtime or peering over someone's shoulder at the latest Gangnam style sneezing kitty touch me on my studio viral clip to do the rounds. You know, the usual activities that constitute the average advertising creative's "working" day.

Now, at the robot on your way home ... Hang on a second. Hold your horses. Back up. Did I just say "at the robot on your way home"? I did. To me, the business of idea generation is a 24/7 job. Your working day has not finished when you walk out of the office at five pm. It has barely started.

You do not down tools until you have the cracked ad in front of you on a piece of paper. Laid bare for the world to see. (At least, for your Creative Director to see. Getting the world to see, hear, or for a brief and unfortunate spell in the late nineties, smell it, is a different skill entirely).

You might be standing in the shower thinking nothing in particular when you come back to your problem. What was it again? A radio ad for a multivitamin tablet.

## Don't concentrate too much

The best time for your brain to tell you what it has to say is when you stop telling it what you want it to say. It is not being forced in one or another direction, its not being pushed or pulled or whipped or red-lined. It's sunning itself on a tropical beach with a margarita in mind when suddenly it's ambushed. You've snuck up on it in a moment of weakness, it blurts out the answer and there you have it.

The idea for the radio ad for the multivitamin tablet is yours. Now all you have to do is write it down, which is the fun part.

Possibly the most extreme example of what I've experienced with "total immersion" is the ad that came to me in my sleep. I wanted to do an ad for the Chiropractic Association of South Africa. I had an interest in chiropractics as a result of having suffered a slipped disc in my neck. (I'd been trying to redeem the Springbok scrum by dishing out scrumming lessons to a hefty Liverpudlian friend after England had whipped us 49-0 one sad Saturday afternoon. It had not ended well for me).

Lying flat on my back in bed one night, I realised that I had two problems. The first problem was that I could not tilt my head either to the left or to the right without pain. The second was the problem I really wanted solved: how to do a poster for the Chiropractic Association.

As I started to drift off, I put the second problem in my head. My brain stood shortly on a beach watching the wave water move to and fro. It must have begun to contemplate angles, twisting, tilting and typography because when I drifted out of sleep in the morning, the solution to the problem was lying in bed beside me like a lover.

The words DOES THIS HURT were written vertically on the poster so you had to tilt your head sideways to read them. If the answer was "yes" you might need chiropractics.

Some months later a Bronze Lion roared it's way into the agency. And what had I done to deserve this? I'd watched rugby, drunk beer, played the fool and then gone to sleep. Advertising is fun sometimes.



## ABOUT JONATHAN STILWELL

A copywriter who has worked at some of South Africa's top agencies. With 15 years' experience in the industry, I've created campaigns for some of the country's leading brands and have won metal at all the local and international award shows, including Cannes Lions, D&AD, Clio, The One Show, Art Director's Club of New York, Pendorings and The Loeries.

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