

# Creative Ideas from the Circus

by Randall Munson, CSP

One of the great sources for creative ideas is what I call “**Creative Cross-pollination.**” Learning about things in one field can generate fresh combinations of ideas in another seemingly unrelated field.

For example, I’ve seen Information Technologists get creative ideas from plumbers - thinking about water flowing through pipes has generated a new idea to handle information flowing through a network. I’ve gotten creative ideas about Internet presentations from the radio - observing the format of talk shows that keep people interested without any visuals has helped me understand how to make web-based seminars interesting even though you can’t see the presenter.

I discovered some creative cross-pollination in an unexpected place. My wife and I had the wonderful opportunity to take our granddaughter, Emily, to the circus. Being a professional clown who has performed in the circus, I love going to the circus myself. But this time I saw the circus through the wide eyes of bubbly 3-year old.

While reveling in the exciting sounds and bright lights of the circus, some light bulbs went on in my head as I discovered some serious business lessons through creative cross-pollination with a circus.

## 1. An elephant ride is an elephant ride.

After waiting impatiently for a year, Emily was finally old enough to ride on an elephant at the circus. She was thrilled! She rode on a real elephant! She didn’t care how big the elephant was, whether or not it had big tusks, how long the ride was, how fast the elephant walked, or how magnificently costumed it was. The only thing that counted was that she rode on an elephant. It was a binary condition - ride or no ride. Last year she didn’t ride; this year she did. The circus didn’t expend expense or energy to offer the best possible elephant ride because that isn’t what really mattered. Ride on any elephant and you’ve done it.

Some business offerings are like that. In search of excellence, we sometimes spend far too much time and energy on things that just don’t matter that much. In a hotel, for example, there are some things like that. Things that are either yes or no. Does the hotel have a swimming pool? Does it have a coffee maker in the room? Does it have high-speed Internet access? It doesn’t really matter all that much whether or not the pool is Olympic size, the coffee is gourmet blend, or the Internet access is faster than 2Mbps. Instead of pouring money into slight improvements in binary things like this, invest in things where slight differences actually make a significant distinctive advantage over your competition.

Don’t try to make your elephant bigger.

## 2. Smile and style even if you goof.

I don't know if the high-wire act at the circus was having a bad night or if they just weren't very good but they fell (into a net, fortunately). They got back up and did a few more stunts and fell again. Before they finished, three of them had flopped into the big brown net. There was no way to cover up the goof and pretend that it was an intentional part of the high-wire act. Everyone knew they blew it. But, each time they climbed back up to the high-wire and continued the act. When they finished, they stepped triumphantly into the spotlight, spread their arms in celebration style, and flashed gleaming white teeth in a victorious smile. And what do you suppose the audience did? They applauded. They even cheered!

Had the acrobats performed the high-wire act in exactly the same way, but at the end disgracefully shuffled off with their heads down and shoulders slumped, the audience reaction would have been totally different. They would not have applauded and certainly not cheered. The audience would have gone home with a lingering disappointment about the high-wire act.

Others reflect your reactions. If you project a positive image of success you will be seen as a success. I've seen it happen in businesses. Take two nearly identical upstart businesses. One business projects an image of success through the quality of their marketing and advertising, the rich feel of their web site, the sharp way they dress, and even the energetic way they answer the phone. The other comparable business projects an image of insecurity. Their marketing and advertising looks homemade, their web site bland and partly under construction, they dress inconsistently and answer the phone with a dull "hello."

The company that projects success will grow into the success others see. The company that projects amateur uncertainty will struggle to survive.

Don't cower; crow. Don't shrink; shine.

I discovered five other business ideas through creative cross-pollination with the circus. I will share them with you another time.

Remember to be alert to the ideas you see in other fields. Let them pollinate you and generate a new variety of creative ideas. This is the power of **creative cross-pollination**.

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