

Forced Connections

From cookie dough ice cream to zombie/Jane Austen novels, intriguing ideas often result when unlikely players collide. By brainstorming lists of products, services, or styles, and then drawing links between them, designers can forge concepts imbued with fresh wit and new functions. For example, most java houses today look alike. They feature dark reds and browns, wooden tables and floors, and—if you're lucky—a comfortable couch. But what if a cafe had constructivist decor instead? Or what if your errand to the print shop doubled as your coffee break? Likewise, laundromats get a rap for being dirty and dingy, yet public laundries offer a greener alternative to individually owned appliances. How could you make a trip to the laundromat a more inviting experience? Combining services or applying unexpected styles can change the way we think about predictable categories. Lauren P. Adams and Beth Taylor

Don Koberg and Jim Bagnali discuss the idea of forced connections as a tool for product designers in their book The Universal Travelor.

A Soft-Systems Guide to Creativity. Problem-Solving, and the Process of Reaching Goals (San Francisco William Kaufmann, 1972).

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How to Force a Connection

Choose a connection.

Depending on whether you are designing a business service, a logotype, or a piece of furniture, decide what kinds of connections to force. Maybe you want to combine services (gym + laundromat), aesthetics (serious literature + cheap horror), or functions (sofa + work space).

Make two lists. Let's say your goal is to design a new kind of coffee shop. Brainstorm lists of functions—tailor, pet grooming,

bicycle repair. Make connections and imagine the results. What would each new business be called? What needs does it address? Who is the audience? Would you want to go there?

Combine styles, messages, or functions. Identify conflicting or overlapping ideas embodied in your core problem (museum + nature, school + lunch, coffee + economy). Create lists of images and ideas associated with each element, and draw connections between them.

Choose one or more viable ideas. Make simple graphic images of interiors, products, and other applications to bring your concept to life. Your choices of forms, color, language, and typography can all speak to the core conflicts embodied in your concept. Use your forced connections to uncover the aesthetic and functional possibilities of your idea. Flat, graphic diagrams like the ones shown above quickly flesh out the main features of an idea without

getting burdened with specifics.

Case Study

Multipurpose Tools

Your house is filled with tools. What happens when you combine two or more of these instruments to make something new? This quick exercise using forced connections yields some ideas that are impractical or absurd but others that could become real products with clever functions. Designer Lauren P. Adams started with verbal lists and then made sketches combining ideas from different lists.



Kitchen Tools **Garage Tools** Office Tools wrench spatula thumbtack hammer ladle stapler nail whisk scissors tape measure knife masking tape T-square hole puncher tongs vegetable peeler trowel pencil handsaw corkscrew glue clamp can opener ruler screw drink shaker marker screwdriver measuring cup compass dish scrubber level paperclip staple gun grater staple remover sledgehammer funnel rolling pin sieve

Handsaw + Ruler. Nearly every saw cut requires measuring first, so why not add a ruler to the saw blade?

Grater + Trowel. Scoop up your freshly grated cheese, or crumble chunks of hardened dirt before planting.

Scissors + Wrench. This looks like a clever idea until you consider trying to actually cut something.

Thumbtack + Screw. The thumbtack head would give your hand something to grip while the screw threads make a secure connection.

Sledgehammer + Drink Shaker. The motion of hammering is similar to the motion used to shake a drink (Sober up before swinging that hammer around.)

Compass + Knife. Cut your cookies to an exact dimension with this gadget for the cook who loves math.