Conceptual Blending Thinking

Idea In Short

New ideas often come from combining two familiar ones. Conceptual blending theory, developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, describes how the mind takes partial structure from two input mental spaces and projects it into a blended space that develops features of its own. Managers can use the same logic deliberately. Choose two concepts from different domains, map what they share, select the elements worth keeping, and test whether the blend produces something that works. Researchers in innovation and design describe blending as a source of semantic creativity and new products. Pick one problem this week, name two unrelated inputs, and write down three features that exist only in the blend.

Many ideas that look original are combinations. A new service borrows the logic of a subscription from another industry, a new product joins two functions, and a new organizational form mixes a team with a platform. Conceptual blending thinking gives managers a method for making such combinations on purpose. This article explains the theory behind the method, shows how researchers connect it to innovation and design, and offers a practical sequence that teams can follow.

The theory in plain terms

Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner describe conceptual blending as a basic mental operation that leads to new meaning, global insight, and conceptual compressions. The operation constructs a partial match between two input mental spaces, projects selectively from those inputs into a novel blended space, and then lets the blend develop emergent structure of its own.1 Mental spaces are small conceptual packets that people build as they think and talk.

Three terms deserve attention. Inputs are the source concepts. Selective projection means that the mind takes only some features from each input, not everything. Emergent structure

means that the blend contains properties that neither input has alone. A manager who understands these terms can ask three practical questions about any proposed combination: what are the inputs, what did we keep, and what appeared that we did not expect?

Where the idea came from

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Theory in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics describes conceptual blending as a theory of idea creation and emergence that draws heavily on the work of Arthur Koestler in the 1960s.2 Koestler published The Act of Creation in 1964, and he described a common pattern in creative achievements in the arts, sciences, and humor. Fauconnier and Turner later developed their own account and presented a newer version in their 2002 book The Way We Think.3

The history matters because it shows that blending belongs to a long line of thought about creativity. The idea that novelty arises when two separate frames of reference meet predates the modern theory. What the blending approach added is a detailed account of how the meeting happens and what the mind does with the result.

Blending as a source of innovation

Anna Comacchio and Massimo Warglien examined innovation through the lens of conceptual combination. They argue that an underestimated aspect of innovation is its semantic creativity, since innovation often involves the generation of new meanings and new representations.4 Their work suggests that new products, processes, and business models can all be understood as new combinations of concepts.

This view helps managers see why naming matters. When a company calls a product a hybrid of two familiar categories, customers know quickly how to use it. When the blend lacks a clear meaning, people hesitate. A good blend therefore requires both a new function and a story that makes the function easy to grasp.

Blending in design

Design scholars have explored the link between blending and design thinking. Jerry Diethelm, writing about conceptual blending and integration in design thinking, asked how

the concept might affect design education and how designers can use it in their work.5 The question is useful for business teams as well. Designers build prototypes that embody blends, and the prototypes let others react to the combination before the company commits to it.

A prototype also helps a team judge a blend. A paper description of a combined service may sound attractive, yet a quick mockup or a role-played customer visit reveals what is awkward. The test turns an interesting idea into a practical one.

A five-step method

A team can blend deliberately with these steps:

1. State the problem and the outcome the customer wants
2. Choose two input concepts from different domains
3. Map what the inputs share and where they differ
4. Select the features worth keeping and project them into a blend
5. Examine what emerged, then test the blend with a prototype

The second step carries the most risk. Inputs that are too similar yield a small improvement, and inputs that are too distant yield confusion. A useful guide is to pick one input from the customer's world and one from a field with a strong solution to a similar problem. The third step benefits from a visual map, since drawing lines between matching elements exposes gaps and false equivalences. The fourth step should end with a short written statement of what the blend is and what it is not. The fifth step closes the loop by asking real users how they understand the result.

Compression and meaning

Fauconnier and Turner highlight conceptual compressions as one product of blending. A compression takes a complicated set of relations and packs it into something a person can grasp at once, such as a single image or a short phrase. Managers use compressions constantly, whenever they describe a strategy as a platform, a funnel, or a marketplace. Each label squeezes a large body of activity into a form that colleagues can remember and discuss.

Compression has a cost as well as a benefit. A vivid label can hide details that matter, and teams may then argue over the label when they should examine the business behind it. A sound practice is to unpack the label after the team adopts it: list what the metaphor includes, what it leaves out, and where it might mislead. That step keeps the blend honest and reveals the assumptions that the team has built into it.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a regional bank that wants to help young customers save. The team picks two inputs: a video game's progress system and a traditional savings account. The shared structure is that both reward steady action toward a goal. The team projects levels, streaks, and visible progress from the game, and it keeps deposit insurance and withdrawal rules from the account.

The blend produces features that neither input has. A customer can unlock lower fees by maintaining a savings streak, and a friend group can pool small goals into a shared target. The team builds a simple prototype and shows it to a small group of customers. They like the progress display and distrust the streak penalty, so the team removes the penalty and keeps the rest.

Using blends in strategy work

Strategy teams can apply blending to business models, not only to products. A company can ask which two existing models it might combine, such as a retail network with a service subscription, and then examine the emergent features. The exercise often reveals revenue streams, partnerships, or customer segments that neither model suggests alone.

Leaders should pair the exercise with a screen for feasibility. A blended model must still fit the company's capabilities, its regulatory environment, and its economics. Teams can keep two or three blends alive, run small tests on each, and let the evidence decide. This approach keeps creativity tied to the realities of the market.

Limits and good practice

The Wikipedia entry on the theory points out that blending theory is not itself a complete theory of creativity. The point carries a practical message. Blending produces candidates,

and teams still need evaluation, domain knowledge, and testing to decide which ones to keep.

Guard against three common mistakes. Do not blend for novelty alone, since an idea must solve a real problem. Do not project everything from both inputs, because a blend that keeps all features becomes cluttered. And do not skip the record: write down the inputs, the projections, and the results so that the team can learn which kinds of combination work in its market.

- 1Conceptual blending, form and meaning
- 2Conceptual blending
- 3Conceptual blending
- 4Conceptual combination: a semantic framework for innovation
- 5Conceptual blending and integration in design thinking

Summary

Conceptual blending explains why many useful ideas look obvious in hindsight: they combine pieces that already existed. The method asks teams to name input concepts, find partial matches, project selectively, and examine the emergent structure that appears in the blend. Research ties this process to innovation because new products and business models often depend on new meanings. Blending is not a complete theory of creativity, and a blend still needs evaluation against reality. Used with discipline, it gives teams a repeatable way to leave their usual frame. Choose two inputs, build the blend, test it cheaply, and keep a record of what the combination taught you.