



*First Look:*

**ThoughtOffice provides impressive set of creative problem solving,  
idea generation tools**

*By Chuck Frey, Founder, InnovationTools.com*

Remember IdeaFisher? This brainstorming software, developed by Century 21 founder Marsh Fisher, used powerful databases of keywords and questions as catalysts for creative thinking. I always wondered what it would be like if someone developed a multimedia version of IdeaFisher - a program that would use words and images to leverage the brain's awesome powers of association even more effectively.

I'm happy to report that an entrepreneur, Mark Alan Effinger, has taken Marsh Fisher's foundation and has used it to build a next-generation brainstorming engine called ThoughtOffice. This new program will help you to take your creative problem-solving skills to the next level.



ThoughtOffice does a great job of leveraging the power of associative thinking. Using its rich, interconnected resources, you can follow a long trail of associations without running out of creative steam. Or you can follow a guided problem solving process to reveal fresh ideas and insights. In short, ThoughtOffice is like IdeaFisher on steroids.

**How the program is organized**

The interface of ThoughtOffice contains four "assistants:" The Idea Browser is the program's lateral thinking toolset, which provides access to an impressive selection of interconnected databases and resources. The Topic Browser is the home to ThoughtOf-

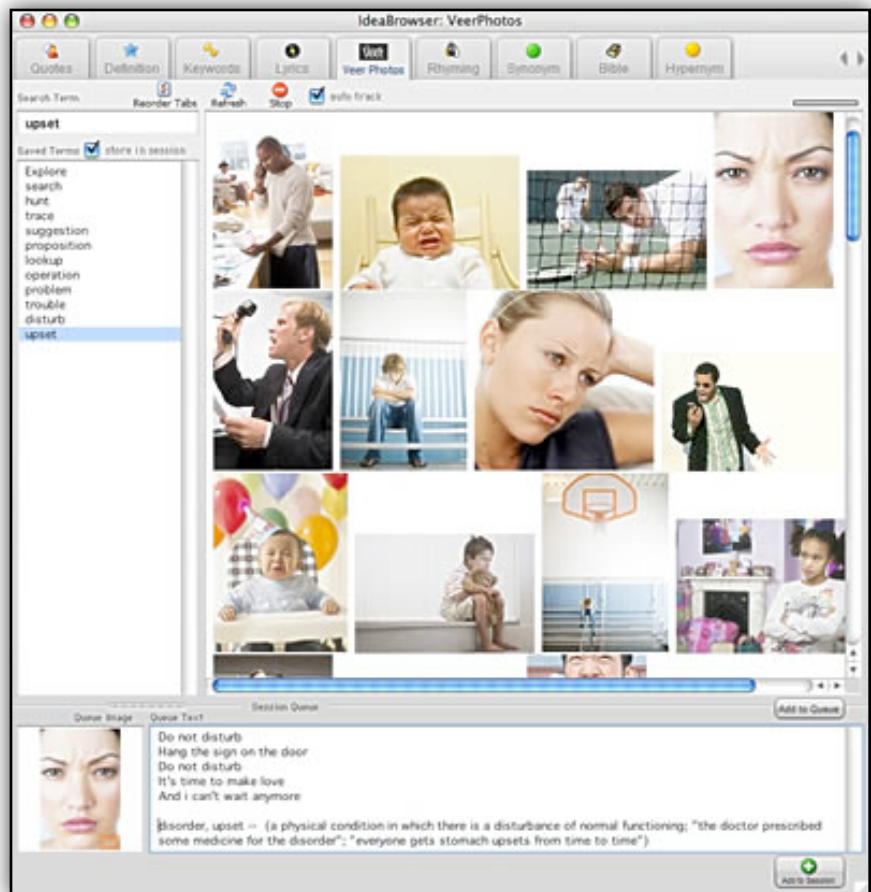


office's question databases, which help you to do vertical thinking - exploring a specific area of inquiry, such as writing a business plan, coming up with new product names and solving problems, for example. The "coach" links the user to a specific web page, which can be used to provide users with access to specialized training resources, and a help button provides access to the program's online help database.

A horizontal line of icons across the top of the program's work area enables you to manipulate the ideas, questions and concepts that you have gathered while brainstorming with ThoughtOffice. You can use these buttons to change the order of items with the workspace, add images and hypertext links to your ideas, format text and more.

### The Idea Browser

The Idea Browser (above right) contains over 7.3 million words, images, definitions, phrases, quotes, word associations, lyrics and synonyms to help you think creatively about your challenge or problem. In addition to the databases that ship with ThoughtOffice, Effinger says that his firm will be continually updating the program to add more tools. They will also offer a software development kit that will enable users to easily

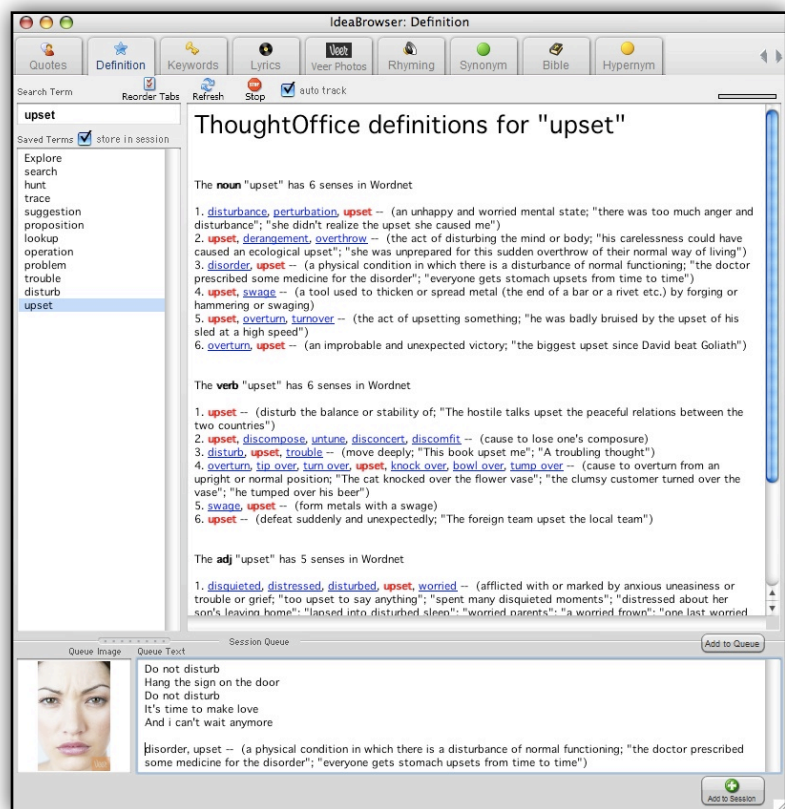


develop their own idea-generation tools that can be imported into the Idea Browser.

As you work your way through keyword searches and word associations, the Idea Browser maintains a chronological list of the words that you searched on and the terms that you have selected for addition into your session document. This makes it easy for you to see what you have done so far. It also enables you to return to any point earlier in the process and follow a different branch of thinking.

One of the tools contained within the Idea Browser is a definition database, which functions something like a dictionary: you can search for specific words or phrases, and the Idea Browser will display a list of meanings as well as related words. When you find

promising words or images, you can easily add them to your session document. You can also double click on any word to select it and explore its definitions. This capability enables you to follow your muse in many divergent directions. Image search tools, which utilize the collections of iStock-Photo and Veer, show off ThoughtOffice's impressive web integration. When you do a keyword search with one of these tools, the program quickly retrieves a set of corresponding thumbnail images. Any one of these pictures can be added to your session



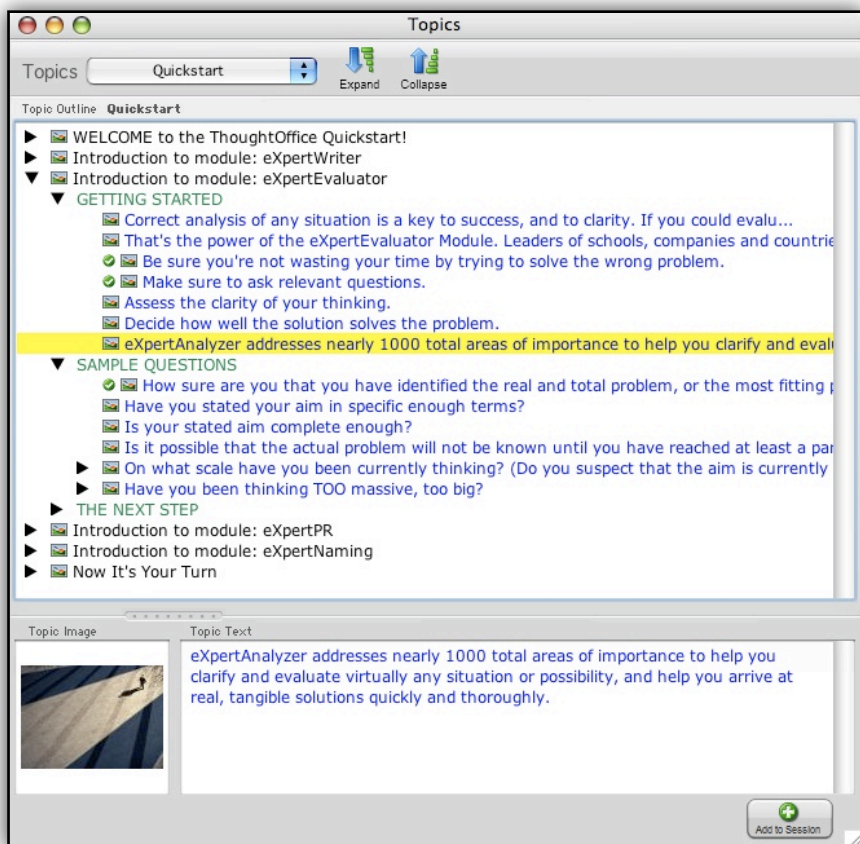


document by clicking the "add to session" button or by dragging and dropping them from the Idea Browser into your session document.

## The Topic Browser

The Topic Browser provides the user with access to lists of specialized questions that are focused on common business challenges. Each expert topics module contains hundreds of questions categorized into major headings and subheadings. Each main section is grouped in chronological order, providing a guided problem-solving process - something like having an expert or a coach at your fingertips.

Expert topic modules are available on the topics of advertising, writing, evaluation, speaking, screenwriting, consulting, naming, solution development, negotiation, public relations, marketing, product development, strategic planning, investigation and business planning.



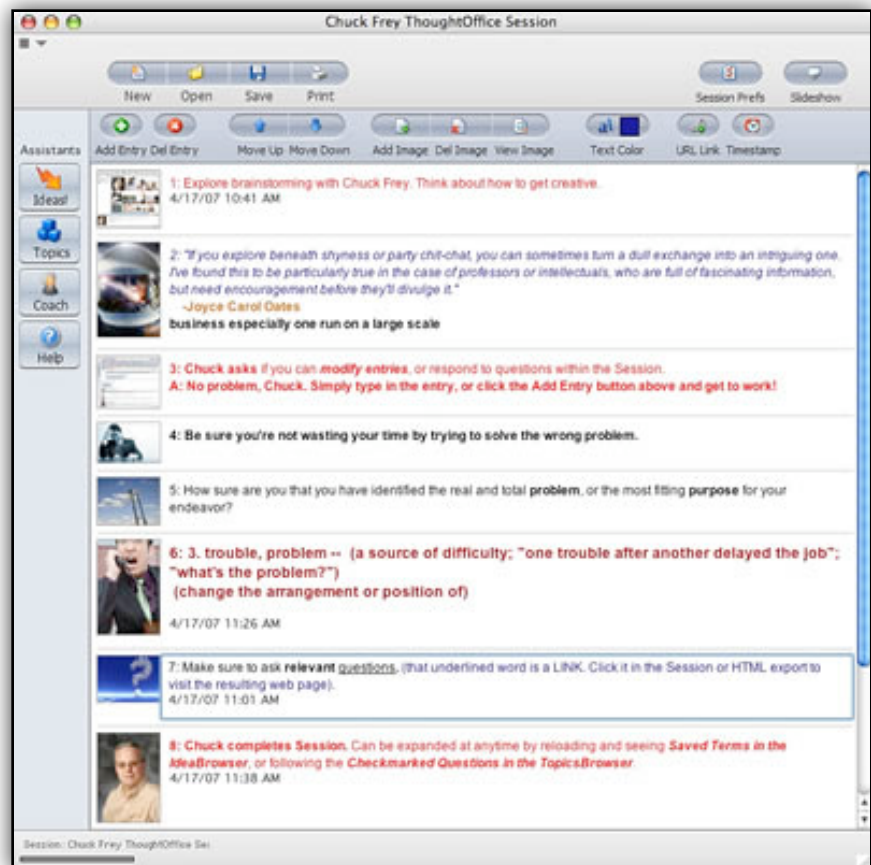


Like the Idea Browser, you can easily select a question, add it to your working session and then type in your answers to each question. Once you have selected a question, ThoughtOffice puts a check mark next to it to let you know that you have used it.

### The session document

All of the resources you gather from the Idea and Topic Browsers gets deposited into the program's main workspace, which is called the session document (right).

The session document is like a dynamic scratchpad where you can review, manipulate and add to the content that you have collected. You can easily drag elements to reorder them into a sequence that makes the most sense to you. All text in the main session window is fully editable. You can also add web page links to it - especially useful if you want



to make reference to a blog posting or to a web page with additional information about the topic or question that you're exploring. In addition, you can add an image to any bit of information that you have pulled into your session, either from ThoughtOffice's supplied image databases or external JPG images.



## Sharing your ideas

ThoughtOffice gives you a number of options for sharing the ideas you have generated. Session documents can be securely shared with other ThoughtOffice users in the program's native file format. You can password protect the results of your session, so you can control who can view your intellectual property.

You can also create a slide show, which can be used to walk an audience through the list of questions, ideas and images that you have gathered. This means that brainstorming facilitators and consultants can use ThoughtOffice to gather questions, key words and other bits and pieces of creative stimuli in advance of a group brainstorming session, and then use the program's slide show mode to present them to the group. Nice!

In addition, you can export a ThoughtOffice session document to a PDF, HTML or text file. When you export a session document to HTML, any images it contains will be displayed in your web page as thumbnail-sized images that can be clicked to display the full-size version.

Settings in the program's preferences enable you to add your name, company, contact information and logo to your reports, to help you protect the intellectual property you have generated. This also makes it easy for ad agencies, consultants and other "hired

**Chuck Frey Session**

4: Be sure you're not wasting your time by trying to solve the wrong problem.

5: How sure are you that you have identified the real and total problem, or the most fitting purpose for your endeavor?

6: 3. trouble, problem -- (a source of difficulty; "one trouble after another delayed the job"; "what's the problem?") (change the arrangement or position of)  
4/17/07 11:26 AM

7: Make sure to ask relevant questions. (that underlined word is a LINK. Click it in the Session or HTML export to visit the resulting web page).  
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brains" to customize the reports that ThoughtOffice generates with their organizational identity.

## **Conclusion**

ThoughtOffice provides users with an unprecedented variety and volume of idea stimuli. It also succeeds in bringing together two different types of creative thinking into one well-designed software program. Its question databases provide a solid foundation for left-brained, systematic problem definition, while its idea-generation tools serve as a catalyst to help the right half of your brain to make new associations and connections, which should lead to more breakthrough ideas.

At US\$99, ThoughtOffice is a bargain; it can easily pay for itself with just one good idea. In addition to the basic package, Effinger's firm also offers a number of specialized versions of ThoughtOffice, bundled with specific topic modules. Program versions available for both Windows and Mac OS X include Communicator, Coach/Consultant, CEO, PR Professional, Inventor, Poet and Comedy Writer.

Still not sure how ThoughtOffice works, or whether it's right for you? Then I strongly recommend that you download this helpful introduction to ThoughtOffice (a 17-page PDF). It provides a lot of valuable background information on the thinking that went into this program, how it functions and even works through an example brainstorming session, complete with screen shots. *Published on 5/23/2007*

### **About Innovation Tools:**

InnovationTools.com is the leading web site for brainstorming, innovation and mind mapping solutions and strategies. Founded by Chuck Frey in 2001, the web site and community has grown to become one of the largest in the world for the practice of brainstorming from a practical, business-minded perspective. You can reach the company at [www.InnovationTools.com](http://www.InnovationTools.com), or email [chuck@innovationtools.com](mailto:chuck@innovationtools.com).