

# Box of Tools

**A**s I write this, I'm looking at the magnificent sycamore tree behind my house. It's laden with thousands, maybe millions, of seeds. Over the course of our dank English autumn, they'll fall gracefully from the tree and perform a ballet on the breeze.

One in 10,000 of these seeds will be lifted by the wind, its perfectly designed rotor spinning it high into the air. It will land in an opening in the right position to sprout roots, and it will begin to grow.

## Innovation is a set of philosophies and methods to help solve problems in creative ways.

Ideas are the same way. We may have thousands of them, but it's the conditions for growth and harvest that are crucial. Great ideas without an environment to support them go the way of decomposed seeds. Providing that environment is the role of innovative thinking.

*Innovation.* The "i" word. In more than 10 years of working with and consulting on innovation, I've heard dozens of interpretations of what it means.

Innovation is not a single tool—it's a toolbox of philosophies and methods. Great innovators embrace the method or philosophy that is most likely to yield a successful result for any given problem, and realize that this may be different every time.

### LATERAL THINKING

Lateral thinking, a term coined by Edward de Bono in 1967, is one of the most powerful innovation

tools. Whilst breakthrough thinking will help you create a full system to work with, lateral thinking gives you the best raw material from which to start.

One of my favorite techniques to stimulate lateral thinking is rule breaking, or thinking about customers who don't use your products rather than those who do. Another is putting yourself in someone else's shoes, although it's important not to be too literal in this exercise.

We challenged an electronics company to think about how some other famous brands might approach their problems. What would a Disney-designed laptop be like? Because Disney is all about family entertainment, its version might be a less solitary and more interpersonal experience, for example.

The idea we got back? A laptop with Mickey Mouse ears! This is linear—not lateral—thinking. Linear thinking is what we're all trained to do in school and what keeps us afloat in business: "Hey, that one worked, let's do the same thing in a different flavor." You know your thinking is linear if it's obvious to others.

Einstein famously said, "If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it." Whilst this may be true in particle physics, business is not quite so straightforward.

Linear ideas have their place in generating sales and keeping brands fresh, but they're unlikely to produce the kind of meteoric growth most businesses aim for. Trying on a new perspective can radically differentiate your offer from your competitors' and help your brand grow into new spaces.

### DESIGN THINKING

Also known as empathic design, this is a technique long used by the best inventors. History shows that the optimal conditions for design thinking are a lack of means, a fervent curiosity, and a shed.

Middle-aged British men in sheds have been engaged in design thinking for the past 200 years. What sets this group apart as leading design thinkers? They act on real-world observation.

The top innovators in the corporate world go into people's homes and watch them interact with products in the course of their daily lives. They then use this information to guide development of new products and services.

Simple observation of teens playing games on their cell phones provided Nokia with key insights that led to the creation of its gaming-optimized N phones. Nokia isn't alone. Companies in fields from consumer goods to pharmaceuticals have embraced design thinking as a means of improving their products.

Does this mean the armchair inventor's days are over? I think not. It's the men and women who live with problems, come up with great solutions, and then find ways to implement them who will always have a head start when it comes to invention.

#### OPEN INNOVATION

Open innovation involves sharing your problems with the world. It relies on the premise that people get immense satisfaction from problem solving and that the solution to a particular problem may already exist in some form. In the past, companies held their innovation cards close to the chest, worrying about competition and corporate espionage.

This is slowly changing as more corporations realize that opening up the challenge to a wider audience vastly increases their chances of success. The benefits far outweigh the risks.

Procter & Gamble is ahead in this arena. Through its Connect + Develop program, P&G makes public its wish list of chemicals, product functions, and solutions. Academics and experts are invited to submit ideas.

Ten years ago that target list would have been one of P&G's most closely guarded secrets—yet publishing it does nothing more than multiply the number of potential solutions. No doubt competitors study the list carefully, but if they had the answers themselves, they would already have put them into practice. Similarly, Toyota invites its commercial partners and suppliers to solve various innovation challenges.

Starbucks tried a rather inelegant form of open innovation—asking its customers to suggest ways of improving the Starbucks experience. I'm not a fan of this method of execution; soliciting input without a specific brief or problem tends to generate responses that are unfocused and of no commercial use.

It also seems opportunistic and cheap. Companies should reward engagement even if the reward is nothing more than the improvements the ideas bring about.

#### INNOVATION FUNNELS

The innovation funnel is the most popular way for companies to manage the flow of ideas from the heads of their employees into the market. Many companies use funnels to guide the process of new product development. Ideas go into the wide end, and after a series of tests, stage gates, and iterations, a product comes out the narrow end and arrives on the market.

The major downside to this system is its slowness. The world moves fast: A company can reasonably expect only six months to capitalize on a great idea before competitors are snapping at its heels. In Asia, this time frame may be as short as three weeks. The funnel is designed to accommodate volume, not deliver quick results. These days it looks like an increasingly inefficient mechanism for getting ideas to market.

But even the innovation funnel has its place in modern business. There are different types of innovation needs, and all ideas deserve to be given a chance. Funnels are a democratic way of handling this.

So what is innovation?

The simple answer is that innovation encompasses all these approaches but may rely on none of them. With so many methods and philosophies in the toolbox, it's no wonder that the "i" word is perceived as complex and nebulous.

The secret to great innovation? Embrace every new trend enthusiastically. Anything that offers a fresh perspective on your customers or a new way to create or assess ideas is worth trying out. And don't assume that the latest hot method is necessarily the answer; it's just another tool to add to the box.

There are no silver bullets—just lots of techniques to experiment with and a world of opportunity. If your business has only one answer, or one definition of innovation, it's time to try something new. You'll be amazed at the results. ■



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