

# The Right Question

**I**t seems everyone these days has opinions on how to achieve innovation. A quick web search reveals myriad blogs, articles, and presentations on innovation, as well as equal numbers of seminars and courses that claim to teach its secrets. From armchair pundits to bleeding-edge thinkers, talk of innovation and its formulation are inescapable.

People often associate innovation with cutting-edge technology and the latest in research, so it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that it can only be attained with these tools. Unfortunately, having access to the latest and greatest tools is no guarantee

## A different kind of query can produce a fresh set of answers.

that innovation will follow. Sometimes the best way to bring about innovation is just a change in perspective.

In the movie *Moneyball*, Brad Pitt's character realizes that his baseball team is in desperate need of a new perspective. The film was based on a true story: The Oakland A's had lost a number of key players, and the management team was pulling their hair out trying to work through which players they could afford as replacements. They were using a highly logical approach (replace a pitcher with a pitcher, etc.), but had a very limited budget (sound familiar?). They openly admitted that the players they could afford were significantly inferior to the players they were replacing.

In short, they were destined for failure. Even though the management team realized this, they never doubted their approach because this was the way they had always done things. Pitt's character thought differently. He knew they were *asking the wrong question* (a.k.a., trying to solve the wrong problem). He didn't know

what the right question was; he just knew they would never succeed by taking their current approach.

That made me wonder: How often are *we* asking the wrong questions? How often do we try to solve the marketing challenges we face every day, using tried-and-true methods that we know won't result in innovative solutions? Tight timelines, small budgets and risk aversion all promote a patterned approach to problem solving—essentially a “templated” way of thinking that guarantees a result.

But how often is that result innovative? Is innovation even possible when working within such parameters? I believe that it is—and it's tied to the very simple approach of finding and asking the *right* question.

Recently, some colleagues and I were analyzing the purchase journey of a commonly purchased packaged-goods product to identify an insight or innovative way to impact that journey and give the brand a strategic in-store advantage. We were using a methodology that has proven successful in the past, but were struggling to find any insights or opportunities for innovation. It wasn't that the methodology was faulty, or that our group wasn't applying it correctly. It was because we were asking the wrong question.

Some purchasing journeys have remained essentially unchanged for decades—we are, after all, humans, and inherently creatures of habit. Sure, certain technological tactics can impact an aspect of the purchase journey (*e.g.*, mobile app usage at-shelf or location-based services providing real-time couponing, etc.) and provide a degree of innovation. But real innovation is bigger than that.

Real innovation changes a consumer's perception or approach to the category entirely. Real innovation can actually change *where* a consumer shops for a product (think iTunes store), *how* a consumer shops for a product (think Amazon) and even *what* a consumer expects from that product (think phone versus smartphone).

That was the order of innovation we were seeking. But we were coming up dry, and it was very frustrating.

The interesting part was that even though we knew at some level that we were doomed to failure by taking the current approach, we kept at it—literally for *weeks*—because that’s how we’d always solved such challenges in the past. We were essentially the management team in the *Moneyball* film.

So, I took a page out of Pitt’s playbook and told the group: “We’re asking the wrong question.” It’s critical to note that *I didn’t know what the right question was*—I only knew that we weren’t going to find our insight by taking the current approach.

Similar to what occurred in the movie, there was a lot of confusion around what was meant by that comment. It’s one thing to state that the wrong question is being asked, it’s quite another to then sit and stare at everyone in the group without following up with “the question we *should* be asking is...” But since I didn’t know what the right question was, I could do nothing more than let the group chew on that idea for a while and see where it took us.

Fortunately, one of my colleagues took a shot at answering the comment. He reframed the question we were asking—essentially turning it on its head. That simple step, like the sun rising on a new day, sent our discussion down an entirely different path, a new path, an uncharted path—to a rather intriguing and potentially category-redefining insight.

Here’s the point: it’s not important to know what the right question is. What’s important is realizing that you’re asking the *wrong* question. There are a lot of signs that indicate that the wrong question is being asked—see if you recognize any of these:

- You feel like every idea that’s coming out of your brainstorming or methodology sessions have all been tried before.
- What are supposed to be insights or innovations are really just tactics or marketing tricks with no long-term impact.
- The answer to the question being asked seems so glaringly obvious and mundane that everyone keeps coming up with the same response or solution.
- You cannot convince yourself that spending *another* hour, session or meeting will get you to the necessary insight or innovation. You’ve hit a wall.

So, then what? How does one go about finding the *right* question? If we stay with our *Moneyball* theme, three steps can take you to the right question.

### 1. Ask advice from people you normally wouldn’t ask.

Brad Pitt found his “right” question in a newly minted analyst who believed that the question wasn’t who could hit the hardest or run the fastest, but rather who could get on base more often than anyone else.

### 2. Be alert to creative misunderstandings.

We all think and process information in different ways. The old saying, “I know that you think that you understand what you thought I said, but I’m not sure that you realize that what you heard is not actually what I meant,” is all too true in many cases, but can be used to your advantage.

You may have people in your group who think you’re asking an entirely different question than you are. They may actually know the *right* question to ask, and all you have to do is get it out of them before they overwrite it with the wrong one everyone else is struggling with!

### 3. Encourage the strange tangents of a conversation.

Similar to an idea tree, tangents can trigger ideas in others. If you can get the “what-if” thoughts flowing, you’ll be closer to finding the *right* question. You’ll know when you hit on the *right* question. The ideas will start flowing freely, the connections will start making sense, you’ll feel excitement in the room and you’ll *know* that you’re onto something new and different. You can identify a strong concept by how easily it translates to every media channel.

An innovative idea or insight works the same way. It will transform the entire process you’re trying to solve for and cause you to look at the same steps that were giving you so much trouble in a whole new light—hopefully one that changes more than just the purchase journey itself.

Innovation is hard to come by, but it’s not hard to spot. There are few things as exciting or fun as building out a truly innovative idea and imagining the impact it will have in execution. Here’s the good news: There is no secret formula for innovation. You can’t buy it, build it or borrow it. You already have it—you just have to ask the right question. ■



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