

THE CLASSIC ROADBLOCKS TO INNOVATION

BY PETER CLARKE

More than ever, there's a demand for innovation through design. And though many companies are repositioning themselves to encourage innovation, some fail to eliminate the historical obstacles to meaningful breakthroughs. This hesitancy is understandable. It's daunting to write the check for innovation that has yet to be proven. Nevertheless, if you really want to pave the path to innovation, you first need to eradicate some potholes.



Shoehorning invention

Some companies “innovate” by either extending their current brand equity or production capability. For these companies, inspiration comes from the questions: “What else can our brand stand for, and let's stretch there” or “What else can I run on this piece of equipment, and let's sell that!” It's the tail wagging the dog.

Instead, to create lasting and meaningful innovation, companies should draw inspiration from consumers' unmet needs, matching them with technology that will enable a solution (regardless of current capability).



Lack of collaboration

One of the biggest dampers on innovation is when critical information isn't plugged in at appropriate points in the process. Most often this is because departments involved with engineering and production don't share their knowledge of existing manufacturing capabilities or the implications of emerging technology. Alternately, marketers and researchers don't tell the production folks about what makes consumers tick.

This is just business as usual. Everyone is working in isolation instead of linking unmet consumer needs with what can be made now or in the near future. With no data exchanged, nobody is considering the creative application of current manufacturing to the consumer's problem. So what happens? Ideas are pursued that consumers don't really need, or that will sell at a price consumers aren't willing to pay, or at a cost the company cannot afford.



Project-based collaboration

Collaborative innovation is a common response to this challenge. And it's a good one. But teams are often assembled around a single initiative and are usually constrained by a program timeline. This almost always excludes the possibility of

‘greenfield’ manufacturing or other forward-thinking capital investments. A reactive problem-solving approach, project-based collaboration yields innovation in fits and starts.

Instead, teams should be assembled for continuous collaboration that encourages proactive vigilance for an investment in enduring leadership opportunities. This enables the team to conceive the ultimate solution, unhindered by timetables, agendas and current assets.



Missing links

Another common barrier to innovation is the absence of designers early in the process. Most companies use their creative partners for execution and rarely for thinking proactively upstream. In fact, designers are trained to ingeniously link unmet consumer needs with manufacturing capability or possibility. As masters of communication, designers can tangibly embody a concept without over-promising or under-delivering on what can be made. Such tangible simulations also are valuable for consumer evaluation and work to mitigate risk for companies by ruling out the possibility of inaccurate results due to misperception of use. The consumer must physically and naturally experience a “looks like, functions like” prototype for accurate evaluation.



No one wants to spend the currency—political or otherwise

The reality is this: groundbreaking innovation requires a longer lead time for development and cost optimization. But before they bankroll innovation-enabling technology, companies require quantitative research to predict volumetric lift. Yet, these capital expenditures and the supporting analysis cost more in time and money than most companies are willing to spend. So, instead of taking the hard road to resilient leadership, they look for short cuts. Concepts are compromised to fit existing lines. Inadequate, less expensive research techniques are used and lead to ineffective solutions that don't fulfill consumer expectations or unmet needs.

Everyone starts their journey to innovation with good intentions, but only companies resolved to remove these obstacles are destined to blaze the trail for others to follow. **BP**

*The author, Peter Clarke, is president and founder of Product Ventures, a packaging and product design and development agency, and a member of **BRANDPACKAGING's** editorial board. Contact Peter at 203.319.1119 or pclarke@pvdesign.com.*