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Innovation in Innovation—Fast Partners and No Speed Dating

It's new times for innovation. Companies attempt to keep new products and product platforms tightly held secrets, although most people in an industry often have at least an inkling of what is coming before a product or product platform is launched. For example, consider the introduction of Toaster Strudel by Pillsbury or new food processing equipment by Rheon. I think most people in the industry had an idea of what was coming before the products actually launched. The details were perhaps a surprise, but the concepts were out there in one form or another.

To keep new products and platforms secret, companies either hire people they believe have the knowledge needed or rediscover the knowledge within the organization. Both methods are expensive and time-consuming. The longer it takes to create something, the more likely it is that it won't be a surprise to the industry when it is released to the marketplace.

Sometimes companies rediscover a process or formula thinking it is something new that has never been done. They are the first to do it! However, there are not a lot of things out there that have not been tried in one form or another. Coming up with an idea that hasn't been tried before is real innovation. So, how do we come up with truly new ideas? This is part of the new innovation in innovation.

Another challenge to innovation is deciding when good is good enough. When do you pull the trigger and send the product to the test market? This is true for any new product going to market, whether it is a line extension or a whole new platform. The question is, does the company have a streamlined method for deciding when good is good enough? Too often a company will attempt to create the "perfect" product, and it never launches. Or, the company performs all sorts of consumer testing, presents a product that hits most of the hurdles, and the vice president of marketing (or higher up) says "That's nice but I like orange muffins more than blueberry, so let's go with orange muffins." Or, a product has been fully tested and is ready to launch when someone decides to change the formula, "Let's go from natural flavor A to flavor B because it is a little cheaper." The longer it takes to decide when good is good enough the less of a surprise a new product will be to the market.

Opportunities for Innovation

There are different opportunities for innovation—ingredients, formulation, processing, and packaging. So, how does a company capitalize on all these innovation angles? Very large compa-

nies may have the resources internally to capitalize in each of these areas, but will it really be an innovative product? My thinking is that it is likely that if the people in a company have been there a long time or are newer but have been trained by the "old timers" (like me), any new products will have been shaped by the company culture or mind set. If a scientist joins a company mid-career, possibly from a different background, then you have a better chance of achieving something truly innovative. The question is, how do you get around this "tunnel vision"?

Pick Your Partner(s)

Look for suppliers, comanufacturers, or consultants with experience in the area you are exploring for a new product. Note, you aren't going for the speed dating experience; you need to get to know your partner before committing to a relationship. To avoid tunnel vision, look for a partner outside the box and choose them carefully. You need a partner who is open to ideas and can be trusted to keep ideas confidential—someone you can bare your proverbial soul to. This is someone who won't laugh at or discard your idea out of hand because it hasn't been done before, since this is the core of innovation.

This is where a good partnership brings strengths not otherwise found and mostly overlooked. For example, company X is a world leader in the production of doughnuts. It wants to make cookies but doesn't know much about them. This is where I see "ignorance" as being truly blissful. An innocent question, the result of a few preconceived notions, is asked, "Hey can you make a cookie like a doughnut?" The answer, "Let's find out and see where it takes us." This is the beginning of innovation. It may lead nowhere or somewhere, or it may lead to the next step in a different area or to a concept that leads somewhere else.

Partnering Takes Commitment

From the ingredient supplier side choose a partner with the right resources. Today, more suppliers are "getting it." These suppliers are offering application services and are staffed by people who have more than just a basic knowledge of product categories. You can go to these suppliers with a general idea or challenge, and they will come back to you with an array of solutions. This response/service can only be offered by a supplier who has people on staff who know your product segment well. This is an investment by the supplier, an investment that only pays off if you, its customer, buys its solutions. The right thing to do is to give credit where credit is due and buy the solution from the supplier that provided it. If you get a solution from company X and then get a slightly cheaper version from company Y, still

buy from company X. If the price difference is significant, then talk with company X about how to trim the cost. A supplier needs to be smart about how it executes an application's resources. This commitment is true also for the comanufacturer that comes up with the next big idea for you.

Taking the Leap and Initiating the Partnership

So, let's assume your suitor comes up with ideas for your next big success. They have made the commitment and spent the money and time to help you succeed. They share your vision of how to succeed and grow. What do you owe them? Nothing really, but if nothing is what you do with their hard work and investment, the next time you ask for ideas the response may not be as enthusiastic. Hopefully, you can take at least one of their ideas and turn it into a product that will make it to the test market.

Success hinges on whether there is a process in place for making decisions to move ideas forward. If the company doesn't have a process or plan for moving ideas forward, everyone could be wasting their time. To succeed the company has to have a process in place before soliciting ideas because decisions will have to be made. Briefly, for everyone to win, a company needs to have the following in place:

1. A predetermined plan or target for what a new product should generally offer. Keep it open and not too precise so it leaves room for innovation.
2. A process or panel to decide which ideas to move ahead with.
3. An understanding that the product needs to be good, not perfect, and a panel or team that has final decision-making power to determine when good is good enough.
4. A commitment to sticking to the process. If the data or majority opinion points in a specific direction, stay committed to that direction.
5. A plan (and budget) for how to test market the winning product.
6. The ability to make decisions in a timely manner.

With these steps in place, everyone's time is well spent, and everyone has a chance of winning. New ideas will move more quickly to market. Faster speed to market means you will have a greater jump on the competition. There won't be time for the competition to catch wind of what is coming. If just one of these steps is missing, the whole process is put in jeopardy. I would argue that this is the hardest part of the innovation process.

Fast – Cheap – Good

This may sound familiar from an earlier article, but it has to be mentioned. An old R&D sage taught me that marketing can have only two of these three things (fast, cheap, and good) when developing a new product. If you want it fast and cheap, it won't be good. If you want it good and fast, it won't be cheap. If you want it cheap and good, it won't be fast. Choosing a partner that is experienced in the area you want to launch a product in offers you the best chance of minimizing the third factor.

Customer Service

The innovation in innovation that is partnering harkens back to a favorite subject of mine—customer service. Offering an application service and responding in a timely manner to a customer's request for ideas opens a door for the suitor, a comanufacturer or ingredient supplier, to a relationship that can

cement the success of the company for years to come. You may work for years to gain the attention of a particular customer. When they finally notice you, you can make all sorts of products together. If you are invited to participate in this type of innovation work for a customer, it opens up a huge opportunity for your company to form potentially long-term relationships in which everyone wins. Don't pass up these opportunities!

Conclusions

The new innovation in innovation involves having the decision-making process in place prior to soliciting ideas. Next you must look for the right partner by finding the experts in the area you are thinking about exploring. Once identified, have the potential partner throw out some ideas for new products and ask them why not this or that? Leverage your partner's years of experience to make the innovative product you want. Nothing cements a relationship like working together on developing a winning product for the marketplace.

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