

Business Builder Article # 27: “Build a Better Mousetrap” January 5, 2011

By Linda Rink, President, *RINK Consulting*

“Think out of the box.” “Push the envelope.” “Build a better mousetrap.”

Whatever clichés they use to describe it, **“INNOVATION”** is the mantra of many companies these days. And no wonder, it’s the holy grail when it comes to beating out the competition.

From a marketplace perspective, developing innovative products and services can put you in the driver’s seat. Because being out in front first means capturing more market share, brand awareness, and general “buzz.” It’s always harder to play catch-up.

Because it’s charting new territory, innovation is inherently risky. Willingness to take on risk is necessary for the leaps of faith that truly innovative thinking often requires. Quoting from the McKinsey Quarterly: “The CEO of one Fortune 500 corporation, asked to explain his company’s declining performance, fingered the ‘lack of a culture of risk taking’; its absence, he explained, meant that the company was unable to create innovative, successful products.” *

Innovation is a hard thing to achieve, though, even with a risk-tolerant attitude. There are no set procedures. It takes a special mindset, a different way of looking at the world or marketplace. And potential customers aren’t likely to help you – many times they don’t even know they have a need until they see the new product that meets it. *Then* they have to have it!

But I guarantee you one thing – successful innovation is not possible without an understanding of your customers and their marketplace.

What do I mean by this? To be truly worthwhile, innovation must be user-focused. In other words, the end user must perceive that the new product/ service is useful and better than what was previously available. Otherwise, it’s just change for the sake of change – kind of like redesigning the package graphics or company logo.

That’s where research comes in. The right kind of research can help *direct* and *inform* innovation. Here’s a real-life example from one of my clients:

Mike Flanagan is Chief Marketing Officer of Bresslergroup, an award-winning product design firm located in Philadelphia. Mike is well-versed in innovative thinking – that’s his bread-and-butter. Research plays an essential role throughout Bresslergroup’s design process, Mike explains:

- For background briefing on the category and marketplace, Bresslergroup relies on the trend information and competitive data that Rink Consulting provides before heading out into the field to question / corroborate what they have learned.
- Field research is often a critical next step in the design process. Mike shares an anecdote about a recent medical device project: “We were doing observation and interview (important that the sequence was first observation and then interview) with surgical team members while studying how users work with surgical scalpels. We watched and video-taped the team interaction during the surgical procedure and saw how the nurse handed the scalpel to the doctor. Then we interviewed the two and they described how they handled the interaction. The only issue was that their story did not match our observation. The lesson for us was that research is obviously important, but the type of research is critical too. Had we relied solely on what the users said they did, we would have missed the most critical findings. Often it’s the unspoken inputs that lead to deeper understanding and innovation.”

- The outcome? A truly innovative new medical instrument that better serves the needs of surgical teams.

Creativity is necessary for innovation; understanding is essential. The right kind of research supports both.

*(Source: McKinsey Quarterly, November 2003. Kevin S. Buehler and Gunnar Pritsch, "Running with Risk.")

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