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INNOVATION: Change the capture process

By Steve Epner

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This is part four in my series of articles on how to innovate. Too many people think you have to start a new business or invent a new product to be innovative and entrepreneurial. Nothing could be further from the truth.



Steve Epner
Innovation

Innovation can encompass many different ways if creating change. Some will be incremental, some may be disruptive. In some cases, there will be inventions, but in the five most common forms of innovation, there is no new product.

Capturing data is one of the most difficult issues in any system. If we make any process more difficult or slower, then the users of that process will complain. They can make any system fail – never underestimate the power of a ticked off worker.

Years ago I had a situation where the company had a mail sorting problem. In the old days, people used to memorize the names of frequent receivers of mail to help speed up the sort. For each person, you needed to know which campus, building, floor, wing, and mail stop. The capture of data provided a source of problem. It took a long time to learn to

sort well, but any use of keyboard really slowed the work as each envelope had to be put down to manipulate the keyboard and then picked up to write the internal location on it.

My solution was to use voice recognition. You would read in the first letter of the first name and the first four letters of the last name. Then the system would look up the full name and display it with the proper location information. If there were duplicates, those would be shown.

When I ask audiences when that system was put in, most guesses are in the last five years. Every once in a while, a joker will suggest it was done 20 years ago. In reality, the system was in and operational in 1973. That was an innovation. We did not develop a new product, just changed the way data was captured.

In my MBA class last semester, one of the young ladies had a problem related to the capture of sales information after a sales call. The two common ways of dealing with the situation was to take notes and transcribe them in the car after the call, or wait to transcribe them in the evening at home or in a hotel. Potential customers do not seem to appreciate a salesperson typing away as they talk. Maybe in another generation, but not today.

Her solution was to capture the information at the source. She found a new electronic pen that would capture her notes as she took them. It also recorded the conversation if she wanted it to. Now, when she wanted to add notes to the sales tracking data base, she

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uploaded her notes from the pen.

What used to take lots of time, a good memory, and typing skills, was now done in seconds and the record of what happened is better than ever before. Plus having the ability to store the conversation, it is easy to go back and review exactly what happened.

As an added bonus, most of the customers seem intrigued by the pen itself. It is a definite conversation starter. In any sales situation, that is a wonderful thing.

Again, there was no new product, just an innovative way to change how data was captured. Over the years we have seen bar codes, RFID (radio frequency identification) tags, and voice recognition. Even now we do not use these technologies for all they are worth. There is lots of room to innovate. But do not stop there. What new methods are possible to capture data? How can we change the way we use old fashioned tools?

Think about the delivery service. They capture your signatures electronically. That saves them time, money and increases accuracy. Simple in execution, but the first users got a competitive advantage worthy of the innovation.

Experiment. Look for new ways to capture data or any other input you require. The opportunities are almost endless.

Steve Epler started his company in 1976 and, in 1992, it became the Brown Smith Wallace Consulting Group. He teaches innovation and Entrepreneurship in the MBA program at Saint Louis University. He may be reached at sepner@bswllc.com

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