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## INNOVATION: Envision new formats to develop new products

By Steve Epner

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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.

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.

How many times have you heard the expression: "One man's garbage is another man's treasure?" It is really true. Sometimes all you need is to see something working in one format and change it to another.

A real innovator here in St. Louis is Robert Fishbone. He may be best known for the Lindbergh Squared mural he and his wife Sara painted on the side of a building downtown. The building may be gone, but many people still remember it.

Among other talents, Robert is a percussionist. He told me about a percussionist convention he went to (imagine 5,000 people beating on every surface they can find) where he saw a "spring drum." It consisted of a hollow tube about a foot in diameter with a drum head stretched across one end and a spring hanging from it. When moved in a circular motion, it made a thunder sound. The inventor sold these to symphony orchestras and other professional musicians.

Robert saw another format and got permission to sell to non musicians. He made the device smaller (so it would fit in one hand, painted it with lightning bolts, and renamed it the Thunder Tube. He proceeded to sell tens of thousands as toys for kids (and adults) to play with.

At a recent program I showed off a thunder tube as part of my introduction to Innovation, (thunder comes from lightning and lightning is sparked by ideas – without new ideas, we cannot survive this economy). The cameraman who was filming the program wanted one to use for sound effects. The meeting planner who hired me wanted one for his grandchild. A member of the audience thought it would be fun to have at a Super Bowl party.

Same basic idea. Same basic product. Just a change of format or use and it is brand new to someone else. What is sitting on your shelf that needs a change of format to make it sell? What can you do to open a new market for an old product (or reintroduce one)?

Consider the in-line skate. It was a great fad and took hold about 25 years ago. The original patent on inline skates was from the late 1800s. Someone saw an opportunity to update an old idea. Change the format. Modernize it and then sell a bunch.

Innovation did not take a new invention, just a reuse of an old one.

Look around. What can you revive? What can you bring into a new market? How can you take something that seems worthless and find the market that will embrace it? The opportunities are out there. They do not necessarily take new technology, a new invention, or

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even a new idea. All innovation requires is you find something that consumers of some type will want to buy.

Steve Epner 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. Steve is a leading advocate for innovation in the region. He may be reached at [sepner@bswllc.com](mailto:sepner@bswllc.com).

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