

Innovation: I know it when I see it?



It's a sad indicator of the level of excitement in my life, but I have at least half a dozen conversations every month rehashing and debating the definition and nature of "innovation". You'd be hard pressed to find someone who will say that they don't know what innovation is, yet there's an incredible amount of fuzziness and outright disagreement over the practical definition. Whether it's sustaining, disruptive, continuous, product, process, or paradigm, what really qualifies a change as an "Innovation"

The Apple iPod has been touted as one of the most innovative products of the last decade. It's become such an integral part of our culture that the term "iPod" has become the generic term for MP3 players in the same way that "Kleenex" has for facial tissue. Yet when the iPod was released, it really wasn't anything new or revolutionary. It was released into a market that was already well saturated with MP3 players. It wasn't larger or smaller than other devices. The music quality wasn't fundamentally better than the best in class. Some would contend that it was the iTunes store that made the difference. But even the iTunes store was nothing new. Audible and MP3.COM had established the online audio purchasing model long before iTunes.

What Apple did is what Apple is good at. They took a number of existing ideas, bundled them together into a very slick, integrated platform and refined and polished it to a blinding shine (literally and figuratively). They made the iPod friendly, accessible and eminently desirable. They created new markets that embraced it and the iPod became the Innovation that previous products couldn't. The real differentiator may have been in Apple's ability to negotiate with music publishers while recording industry cabals were making life miserable for almost everyone else pursuing the digital distribution model. But even that was just a piece of the overall success.



Image via [Wikipedia](#)

When the IBM PC (5150) was released, it also wasn't anything really new or inventive. In fact, in many ways it was a step backwards, while hobbyist PCs were moving forward into multi-user, multitasking operating systems, GUIs and other more user friendly interfaces. However, the IBM name, the open nature (inadvertently, perhaps) of the platform and the positioning as a "business PC" helped to create a cultural revolution.

With that in mind, it's fairly easy to agree that Innovation is something very different from invention. Invention is conceiving of something new. It's about ideas. Innovation is the delivery of those ideas in a way that "sticks". Innovation is about execution.

The Apple Lisa was the first commercial PC to use a mouse and graphical user interface. It was a very inventive and innovative* platform (*exhibiting characteristics of, or the potential for, Innovation), but failed to become an actual Innovation itself. To use a marketing term, it failed to 'stick'. Whether it failed as a consequence of bad timing, pricing or other forces isn't really relevant. It was an obvious 'game changer' that didn't attain its full potential. The Lisa went the way of the Xerox Alto and CDC Plato V that spawned it. The Lisa may have laid the foundation for the Macintosh and even Microsoft Windows. But, it facilitated innovation rather than qualifying as one. It was 'Innovative', but not an 'Innovation'.

So if we accept that Innovation is about successful execution, what are the criteria for 'success'? Is it about profitability? Is it about competitive advantage? Using either criteria, things like Linux, the Internet, Social networking and Web based computing aren't Innovations. While companies would quickly go bankrupt if they funded Innovation with no regard for the business impact, there does need to be a clear understanding that an Innovation can often disrupt a revenue stream or provide no immediate competitive advantage, but can lead to much higher returns in the long run.

Print media companies are finding their traditional business models gutted by the internet, but those that embraced new online models are finding reduced costs, improved access to customers and new ways to earn money in the new economy. Successful companies embraced ideas that were clearly going to have a short term negative impact, but presented infinitely more opportunities. This clearly qualifies as Innovation.

So, Innovation isn't invention. It is about successful execution. But 'success' isn't necessarily measured in dollars. That leaves us with the 'stickiness' of the idea. How widely is an idea accepted and adopted? Does it change behaviors? That ability to refine, polish and sell an idea is really where we start to see some common threads between recognized Innovations. In the case of Linux and the Internet, no one person or group was responsible. Instead, the idea was inherently attractive enough that hundreds and then thousands and now millions refined the idea as a group. The iPod became an Innovation primarily through the design and marketing of Apple, but the iTunes store was polished and refined by the scores of labels, artists and application developers that have been contributing to it for almost a decade. Without that synergy, neither iTunes nor the iPod might have been successful.

The summary, so far:

- Innovation is not synonymous with 'profitable', though Innovation does provide opportunities for profit or competitive advantage if you know how to exploit them.
- An Idea has to be implemented successfully to become an Innovation.
- Innovation is not always about invention. It can be about repackaging, recombining or simply re-presenting ideas at the right time, in the right way or to the right audience.
- Innovation is reliant on the audience to accept an idea and adopt it. Without adoption, there is no Innovation.
- Innovation relies on the good will and enthusiasm of idea generators and adopters. No amount of force or coercion will turn an idea or product into an Innovation.
- An Idea can be attractive enough that it becomes an Innovation without a direct sponsor or Innovation team behind it.

So what does this mean for Innovation teams?

- Our sponsors need to understand that they may be funding initiatives for the long term and at the expense of the short term. This is a difficult concept for many organizations to accept. An analogy would be surgery; we sometimes have to deliberately accept some short term damage, pain and weakness for our long term health and welfare.
- Collecting ideas, filing patents and coming up with new designs is a good thing, but it's not a true Innovation until you can get traction and actually implement the ideas. Innovation teams need to spend a lot of time laying ground work that might not seem to be innovative and may never directly contribute to a specific innovation. But building credibility, establishing relationships and providing incremental value are essential to eventually get to the Innovation itself.
- An idea doesn't need to be new in order to be Innovative. It could be a dusty old idea that can be polished and put to good use now that the timing is right. There may be a lot of value in revisiting ideas that failed or were shelved in the past. 'We've tried that a hundred times before?' should be a sign of an idea with merit. We need to make sure that our audience understands

that 'innovative' behavior isn't just coming up with new ideas. It's often about recognizing opportunities for existing ideas or simply being open to change.

- Innovation teams don't make Innovations. The audience does. It's important that an Innovation team engages their audience and encourages them to adopt an idea. Innovation teams should be marketers, facilitators, mentors and close working partners with all of the stakeholders. We often focus strictly on the people doing the work or paying the bills rather than the people that we will ask to adopt our Idea . Never forget that we put on the show for the audience and not for the players.

- Innovation teams need to be careful not to alienate the sources of innovation by taking all of the 'cool' or 'fun' work for themselves. Teams need to be careful to freely give credit to their sources and avoid grandstanding for themselves. It's a difficult balance when Innovation teams find themselves fighting with their own audience for funding. But finding that balance of recognition and ownership is an important element to a successful program.

- If an idea can be properly communicated to the right audience, it can develop a life of its own and become an Innovation.

While this isn't the end of the discussion, it does capture a lot of my personal views on Innovation. If nothing else, it can help to reopen the dialog in your organization and may even lead to an Innovation of your own views and processes.