

Innovation: It's not about the toilet paper



We've lost our way. There's really no other way to say it. Over the past few months, I've seen some disturbing trends in discussion groups, magazine articles, conferences and even in the day-to-day execution of Innovation programs that makes me seriously wonder if there's some industry-wide April Fools joke going on that I wasn't a part of.

This suspicion was driven home when I came across an innovation program whose big "success story" was that they managed to get the toilet paper dispensers loosened in all of the bathroom stalls across the building. Apparently, the prior building owners/occupants had tightened the rolls to make it harder to pull off long strips and thus saved the company a dollar or two over the fiscal year.

Don't get me wrong. This was obviously an inconvenience to people and something that should have been fixed. But when an Innovation program becomes nothing more than a suggestion box, I contend that it's not about Innovation anymore.

In 2010, I shared an "off the cuff" comment in my presentation at E2.0 that Innovation isn't always about the big, disruptive changes. It can be little things that subtly change behaviour and drive big changes. An example that I provided was placing garbage receptacles directly outside of the bathroom doors. What we found was that people were more likely to use a paper towel when opening the door from the inside when they knew that they'd have somewhere to toss it out. This, combined with some simple awareness emails, encouraged people to wash their hands, unconsciously use their wet paper towel to wipe the door handles as they left the bathrooms and reduce that particular vector for disease.

So, why would I consider paper towels to be innovative, but not loosening toilet paper dispensers?

To answer that question, let's go back to what an "innovation" is. I've written and spoken on this topic before, so I won't rehash the whole discussion. If you're interested, check out my 2010 article ["Innovation: I know it when I see it"](#)

At the heart of the issue is whether or not an idea/suggestion/"good thing" is adopted by the masses and if it changes behaviour. In a business context, there is an additional requirement and that is "does it add value?".

On the surface, our "paper towel" example isn't particularly exciting or innovative. However, as we were directly responding to the 2009-2010 H1N1 pandemic and had a business objective to mitigate the spread of infection in our offices, this was an easy-to-implement and inexpensive change that had a significant impact on behaviour. It wasn't about the paper towels, it was about shaping behaviour to address a business need. It just so happened that we were able to do that with a relatively minor change. The unfortunate side effect is that sometimes people only see the surface impact and miss that there's a business objective being addressed.

When the innovation program fails to "connect the dots" between initiatives and business value (or behavioural changes that lead to business value), they become little more than custodians, patching cracks and never actually "innovating" anything.

Have you lost your way? Check to see how your current list of initiatives and "successes" stack up:

- Does/did the idea support (even if indirectly) one or more of our strategic objectives?

- Would/Did the implementation change behaviours? How?
- Does the idea translate into business value?



If the answer to any of these questions is "no", it's probably not Innovation. Installing a ping-pong table in the break room, arranging for on-site car washes or putting BBQ Corn Chips in the vending machine aren't generally going to qualify as innovation. The exceptions might be if your marketing strategy involves employees forming an Olympic Table Tennis team, you're selling cars or you're test marketing the products that you produce in your own break rooms.

Unfortunately, many Innovation teams have become so focused on Ideation that they've forgotten that the purpose of collecting and developing ideas is to generate business value. As a result, they've become dumping grounds for every idea, suggestion, complaint or "brain fart" that any associate ever has. It's fine if you want to share the pipeline between Innovation and your suggestion box. Just make sure that you channel the suggestions and complaints to where they belong. Don't burn the reputation of your Innovation program dealing with things that have nothing to do with Innovating.

Unless you're Kimberley-Clark or you're installing ultrasonic bidets to reduce your carbon footprint, it's not about the toilet paper.