

Beyond *Aha!*

BY ALLEN ADAMSON

LANDOR ASSOCIATES

What does the sexy, new, ultrathin LG OLED 3D television have in common with Procter & Gamble's Tide Pods—those cute little three-in-one laundry cleaners? What do Kraft's Sizzling Salads dinner kits, which allow you to put a "homemade" dinner on the table in minutes, have in common with 3M's oh-so-convenient Scotch Pop-Up tape dispenser?

And, what does the Scoop Coffeemaker from Hamilton Beach, the single-serve brewer that lets you use any ground beans, have in common with GE's Bright from the Start light bulbs—or, for that matter, what does it have in common with Yonanas, a terrific device that allows you to make an incredibly creamy but healthy treat that looks, tastes, and feels like soft-serve ice cream?

They are all the result of successful brand innovation, the process by which an idea or invention is translated into a good or service for which people will pay money.

The bar for brand innovation continues to rise only higher and it's going up fast. With the plethora of new products and services hitting the market, and the speed with which they're being introduced, having the ability and agility to jump this bar is more important than ever. Having the wherewithal to identify something that consumers have never seen is essential to survive in this marketplace, let alone gain a leading edge. Having the necessary means to get it into the market before the next guy gets there is equally important.

"Aha" innovation is nice to have. Getting it on the shelf quickly is nicer still, if not downright critical. What used to be called first-mover advantage might well be called fast-mover advantage.

In some cases, those who are looking to cash in on the next new thing often start from an obvious position. Literally obvious. As in, "Gee, why didn't I think of that? It's so obvious." It's kind of akin to the old Jerry Seinfeld routine in which he'd ask a question

like, "Ever wonder why they don't make muffin tops without the rest of the muffin?"

Those who know branding will tell you that some of the most inventive and long-standing brands have been built on something hiding in plain sight. For example, the magical folks at Pixar understood that kids are not the kids they used to be. They don't go for cute mice and bunnies anymore. They've been influenced by all of today's digital technology, sophisticated apps included, and the movie entertainment choices were not reflecting this.

Pixar also recognized that as much as seven-year-olds are not into dancing animals, they don't go to the movies by themselves, either. Although these trends may seem obvious, it took Pixar's innovations to create movies that parents would want to take their kids to, and that adults would gladly go see on their own.

Another brilliantly obvious moment led two ingenious college guys to come up with a line of products that is currently giving some of the biggest names in the brand world a run for their money. Unlike most imaginative college entrepreneurs, they're not operating in the digital realm. Rather, they're cleaning up with cleaning products after asking themselves a couple of "wonder whys." As in, "Ever wonder why the products you use to clean your body and home have to be made with harsh, toxic chemicals?" Or, "Ever wonder why the cleaning products you use every day come in containers so unattractive you have to hide them under your sink?"

Ever since San Francisco-based Method first entered the category in 2001, founders Eric Ryan and Adam Lowry have achieved double-digit sales growth and become game-changing players in an ultracompetitive category. I've heard these guys speak at a number of industry events and their tale of success never ceases to amaze me, for a couple of reasons.

First, I used to work at Lever Brothers, a once-giant brand name in the cleaning products business. Even way back then, if someone had asked me if there was any room for innovation in the detergent or soap category, I would have said "no." As Method's environmentally-friendly products and designer-worthy packaging show, there was major room for

A big idea won't fly without quick and brilliant implementation.

inventive improvement. You just had to know where to look.

Second, Ryan and Lowry never stop investigating opportunities to expand the brand, always in ways that are in keeping with their original promise to keep it green and ensure that whatever it cleans, it does as well as any competitor. As they told the audience in one conference I attended, “Disruptive innovation is the goal we strive for. Big companies talk about economies of scale. We want to make the category about something else.”

Method is about something else — products that reflect a passion for caring for the environment, along with presenting beautiful design. Or the way the guys sum it up, “To be a catalyst in a happy, healthy, home revolution that improves human health.” Yes, the brand is still small compared to P&G, Unilever, and Clorox, but because of its laser focus on giving consumers what they want and need (clean and green), the biggest players in the category have had to make adjustments in their own lineup of ecofriendly cleaning products. Or, as the book Ryan and Lowry wrote with co-author Lucas Conley more concisely states in its title, *The Method Method: Seven Obsessions That Helped Our Scrappy Start-up Turn an Industry Upside Down*.

There is no doubt that the marketplace is being rapidly and overwhelmingly commoditized, pushing innovators and manufacturers to turn things upside down and inside out in their search for the next new thing. They know that while research is an essential factor in their efforts, they also know that time is of the essence. A better mousetrap is only better until it isn't, which, these days, can be a matter of months, not years.

Basically, the innovator's mission is to come up with ideas to sell. This could be a new product that the world has never seen before or, as Ryan and Lowry put it, is truly disruptive in the category. On the other hand, the initiatives can be relatively incremental in the grand scheme of things, but represent a huge upside business opportunity. Much like Tide Pods, Kraft's Sizzling Salads dinner kits, or the evolutions of Scotch tape or GE light bulbs, the innovation might be

a new articulation or a new experience for a well-known brand.

Typically, large global companies that have complexity built into their worlds are not places from which emerge things you've never seen before, à la Apple i-products, Google search engines, or just inventive appliances that make low-fat, ersatz ice cream. The first step in the innovation process is to look at the character and mission of the company — whether it's game-changing or simply a smarter, better way to do business as usual.

Some companies have the stomach and stamina for game change, while others are more comfortable with taking an idea that might have been disruptive six months ago and figuring out a way to commercialize and bring it to the masses in a more efficient way. Innovation is a mile wide and an inch deep. Everyone uses and misuses the word. I have yet to meet a marketer who doesn't want to instill a “culture of innovation.” Success, however, is a matter of assessing what they want to achieve in realistic terms. This means identifying the barriers. Everyone in the organization has to be on the same page, have clarity on goals and ambitions.

Based on my experience, one of the biggest barriers to successful innovation is the natural inclination people have to say “no” to anything new. We're programmed as human beings to question the unfamiliar, to feel comfortable with the things we know. The familiar will always triumph. The way to overcome this fear factor is to determine that the new idea is something consumers will find relevant, and then demonstrate how it fits within the context of what they already understand. If consumers can see how it will make their lives better in some different way, it's more likely to work. False innovation is possibly more detrimental than the status quo. To succeed, a new idea has to address some specific need or desire.

More than this, what often separates successful innovation from new ideas that fail is a key person who's driving the success internally — a credible person, someone with political capital. Let's face it: Most companies have a culture of conformity. Even in a large organization, if you have someone to be the

maverick, someone persistent and persuasive, you're more likely to advance the ball.

It's also important to be able to get people to picture a new innovation. If you can't show it, you're never going to sell it. This is very hard to do with a PowerPoint deck. You've got to create emotional traction behind the idea. Put something on the conference table that says, "Here it is! This is what it looks like. This is how it comes out of the box. Here's how you open it. Here's how it will work." You've got to help everyone understand the experience.

If you don't have a positive prototype, either an exceptionally well-executed product or product story, the idea will never get out of the conference room. If you can get it "like real," and sell it in the conference room, people are more likely to suspend the natural inclination to say "no" to the unfamiliar. They'll get excited about it, and you have to get people excited. You need to bring your new thinking to life so that your audience says, "Wow! That's it!"

When it comes to innovation, it needs to be understood from the rational point-of-view, the head—it has to be something your customers can really use. And you need it be understood from the emotional side, the heart; it has to be something that will make your customers' lives easier or more enjoyable. You've got to create emotional traction inside the company if you want to create it outside.

Successful innovation also requires having a culture of excellence—demanding great things. Just think about Apple. Something's got to be really great to get out the door, onto the shelves, and into people's homes. It's also imperative to move as quickly as possible, before someone gets out there first. This means you have to determine at which points along the way—from that "aha moment" to the commercialization—that you say "yes" we need this, versus "no" it won't impact the final product. You have to discern which bells and whistles will matter and which won't.

Whether it's a brand's line extension or a totally new product or service, it's imperative to radically shrink the timeframe. Eliminate bad ideas and maximize the evolution of good ideas quickly. This takes getting an interdisciplinary team together, including representatives from research and development, engineering, sales, marketing, packaging and, yes, management. It's essential to get key decision-makers involved from day-one to create pressure, intensity, and urgency. The goal should be to remove all wasted time that could transpire over the usual six-month timeframe.

You have got to get rid of that assembly-line

processing approach where you work on one thing and then pass it along to the next group. You cannot use a conveyor-belt process and get something out the door effectively and efficiently as is required today. Innovation is most effective with the big-bang approach, with everyone working together.

It's kind of like the opening of a Broadway show. The whole cast is involved and the outcome is unified and passionate. It's after this groupthink that we create the prototypes and share them with consumer groups, and then implement concept screening to see what connects and what doesn't. This gives us realistic feedback to iterate and fix what needs fixing. Again, it's much like a Broadway show that opens out of town first to ensure that people laugh and clap in all the right places.

Innovation has almost become table stakes in this crazily competitive and commoditized marketplace. To succeed, you must start with the problem you're trying to solve, the business issues, and the capabilities at hand. There is never a lack of information, of course. It's about boiling down the copious details and zeroing in on the key issue. What can you do that will make the consumer experience different and better in a meaningful way?

Once you've got a laser focus on your mission, you must move quickly and decisively. Chances are there are other folks who've come to the same conclusion. Just having an idea isn't enough anymore. Speed-to-market is a significant differentiator in the arena of innovation, along with brilliant execution. You need a team that can push back against the obvious evils of time and money, who rock with both phenomenal creativity and persistence. And, you need to be able to visualize the possibility—literally and figuratively. I can't overstate the importance of "seeing is believing."

Bottom line, to win for the long-term, to gain and keep the edge, successful innovation means going beyond the *aha*, that clever product or service that addresses what people want or need, to quick and brilliant implementation. Obvious in retrospect, but aren't all inspired ideas? ■



ALLEN ADAMSON is managing director of **Landor's** New York office and author of *The Edge*, available in January 2013 from Palgrave-MacMillan. For more information, Allen can be reached at allen.adamson@landor.com.