

Why marketers need structured innovation to achieve real progress

BRANDS OF THE FUTURE

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Eureka moments must come with discipline to become advances

Innovation is a powerful force for business success, but big companies can sometimes be too slow to adapt. Corporate red tape, endless rounds of approvals and a general fear of failure foster cultures reluctant to give up on established ideas and solutions, even when they no longer serve the enterprise and its needs.

When you walk around a show like [CES](#) last month or Mobile World Congress, in Barcelona, Spain, you see lots of technology that has the potential to change the way we work as marketers. We don't need to panic about voice, AI and changes in transportation, retail and consumer tech, but neither can we stick our heads in the sand.

The solution is to apply new processes to our culture; to make innovation a part of our daily lives as marketers. Ad hoc innovation, the spark of an idea, the eureka moment that creates a one-off piece of excellence, is no longer enough.

We need to be rigorous if we want to create an innovation pipeline. The good news is that marketers can manage innovation in a structured way and that key behavioural changes can vastly improve how effective we are likely to be as innovators.

The first requirement is a new attitude toward risk. No one's asking you to be carefree with your company's money, but the old rule that you can learn more from a failed idea than a lucky success truly applies to innovation. The best programmes are tailored to the needs of specific companies and built to deliver innovation against their KPIs, which means even the failures teach them about their core areas of concern.

Coca-Cola's The Bridge, for example, focuses on five key pillars: consumer engagement, consumer retail, supply chain, marketing innovation, and health and wellness. It's critical that you stay focused on what your brand truly needs.

Voice, for example, is already impacting search dynamics. How important is being on the first page when your Google Home recommends a bottle of wine at the very moment you're headed to the store?

Having a clear mission makes it easier to make a buy-or-build decision, identify potential partners and ensure you don't get swayed by exciting technology that doesn't actually solve your business challenges.

Once you've got the right attitude and a clear remit in place, you then need to find the right startup with which to partner. There are thousands of startups, all producing interesting tech solutions. Knowing who and where they are, what they do and when to engage is a challenge for many marketers. Many use advisers to find the diamonds in the rough.

Be sure the advisers you select are independent. You need them to recommend partners

that will benefit your company, not just pay them a fee. A narrow or biased adviser will limit the potential of your innovation efforts. International advertisers such as [Mars](#), with its global Launchpad initiative, and Unilever, with its Foundry programme, clearly understand the need to work with partners who look beyond Silicon Valley.

And once you've found the right startup, you also need to have the right kind of partnership. Startups are significantly different than corporations, and some of these relationships will be quick flings while others will become long term. The only universal rule is that you need to be clear and upfront about your expectations.

Creating a charter for each partnership helps deliver meaningful (and mutual) benefits. Disney Accelerator 2014 graduates Sphero and SnowShoe have gone on to create several products for the company beyond the initial funding stage.

Finally, you need to be quick once everything is in place. The point of working with startups is to create a culture of agility, and that should include the ability to take an innovation — along with new features, products and services you create with it — to market as rapidly as possible.

Exceptional marketers have always applied a great deal of discipline to research, product development and pricing tasks, and it's this muscle memory that will serve them best.

Innovation may look 'creative' — and it is— but those who can add a layer of structure, definition and process will succeed in delivering the best, most promising ideas.

Everything else is just, well, a lot of noise.

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