

Putting the "NO" in Innovation



"We Put the NO in Innovation"--TV Ad for Shredded Wheat(TM) cereal

Innovation has been the hot topic over the past few years and it's hard not to see it used, sometimes inappropriately, in virtually every business conversation. Though the jury is still out on whether our commitment is strong enough to survive the current business conditions, there is still no long term doubt that those who do not innovate in some way are doomed to die off. But innovation can be overused. Have you seen the recent TV ad from Post Cereals about Shredded Wheat? It hypes the fact that Shredded Wheat is virtually unchanged from its original form decades ago and by golly it's going to stay that way! The spokesperson puts the word INNOVATION up on a flip chart and says "we put the NO in InNOvation"! Now Post may be innovating in other business aspects of making this cereal, but the product will not change.

What's the significance of this? Why should we pay attention in this current climate that innovation is the savior of all corporate business problems? Well, sometimes, innovation must be thought about in the context in which it is being considered. Do you remember "new" Coke(TM)? Millions of dollars were spent reformulating (innovating?) the basic ingredients and formulation for a decades old product because someone in marketing thought that a change was needed and the "innovation" in the flavor was judged to be "better". What happened? Have you seen this product on the market after its first few months or so? There are certain inviolate issues, feelings, and standards that, despite their irrationality in the minds of some, ARE standards and innovating just to be different can be a costly mistake. We would probably all agree that the metric system makes more sense than the British system of measurement. Will it ever come into common use in the US? Not in my lifetime--so in my opinion inventing some product or software that depends upon that conversion and acceptance would be a huge mistake and waste of money. In the engineering world there are hundreds of standards for comparing and measuring things. Some of these tests make no sense today, but changing the way something's performance is measured can take decades to change.

If raspberries and other materials were mixed in with or embedded in Shredded Wheat, would it still be Shredded Wheat? When you are innovating, make sure you know the landscape of unwritten, sometimes psychologically based standards and barriers that are just simply not worth the time you have to bring new products to market. Make sure that the definition of success in innovation has strong input from your customers and not just your marketing and sales people. If you're innovating in the Shredded Wheat(TM) space, make sure you've eaten some of them and understand why someone may or may not want to change.