THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF INNOVATION
Let me tell you a story...

Just over 10 years ago, convinced my comfortable career in brand management at Procter & Gamble, Pepsi and Unilever would be dead on arrival, I switched from my comfortable career in brand management at Procter & Gamble, Pepsi and Unilever to go it alone as an innovation consultant. My conclusion was that people who told me they wanted to generate insights and value propositions within 3 meetings had no idea what that meant, how it would be done or even what success looked like at the end. All around me I saw consultancies, agencies and gurus talking a back end of understandable behind closed doors and closed conference methodologies. There was confusion, at the end of each project, the client was usually left with some powerpoint report, some poorly written concepts and a huge bill to explain to their boss. I suppose it was at that moment that I realised that baffling the client was a mug’s game. Instead I needed to offer help in aligning the basic language, principles and approach.

I decided that the training course would have to explain this euclidean principle of how to create insights and value propositions. I also decided that there had to be a series of stories to link the principles together.

Here we are a decade later and I’ve personally trained 35,000 people. I’ve trained the board rooms of the world’s biggest technology companies right through to the smallest start-ups. It’s hugely satisfying when someone comes up to me at an airport and says ‘I loved your training. I always tell people your story about the whale, the dream programmer, or the iron that phones you at work’. They never say, ‘I so loved your Venn diagrams!’

More and more nowadays, I’m invited to go into companies at the request of someone I trained years back, who wants me to explain the principles to a new generation. The request is always the same ‘Make sure you use those great examples’, and of course I’m never short of those.

Over the years I’ve been suggested that I write these principles down in a book, but the idea of writing something that ends up in an airport book shop fills me with dread. If you want that kind of stuff ‘Go buy a book in an airport bookshop’. The key is that the principles are delivered in an entertaining way that holds my attention. Training needs to be entertaining, interactive and aligned to something that holds my attention. My torture test for any training would have to be ‘Would I sit through this?’ which is a tough test indeed.

I was however no training on ‘What is an insight?’ and ‘How do I write and test a value proposition to see if a new product should proceed?’. So I set about creating a training course on the key question of how to create insights and value propositions. I ensured that whenever there was principle to be taught, there were entertaining true stories to back them up.

I quickly learned that the more outrageous and ridiculous the bad examples, the more effectively people learned what not to do. The more elegant and simple the good examples, the more they saw why they needed to change. Equally if what I’m saying is true, I shouldn’t have just one example, but hundreds.

Here are some of my best examples:

- The whale
- The dream programmer
- The iron that phones you at work
- The 3-day switchboard installer
- The 300 people training in the board room of a technology company

I’ve made it clear that these are stories, and not training. They’re stories extracted from the training experience. The training is the hard work and the stories are the easy bits. The principle is to be learned, not told. Stories are the key to learning, and mold the principles together.

Innovation:

Innovation is the process of taking an idea and making it happen. It’s about turning ideas into realities. It’s about creating something new, something that didn’t exist before. It’s about pushing the boundaries of what’s possible.

Innovation is not about being the first. Innovation is about being the best. Innovation is about taking a risk, trying something new, and succeeding.

Innovation is about being creative, thinking outside the box, and not being afraid to fail. Innovation is about being persistent, not giving up until you succeed.

Innovation is about being passionate, about loving what you do, and being willing to work hard to make it happen.

Innovation is about being brave, about taking a leap of faith, and not being afraid to make mistakes.

Innovation is about being a leader, about being willing to take responsibility, and being willing to take risks.

Innovation is about being a problem solver, about being willing to think creatively, and being willing to find solutions to problems.

Innovation is about being a team player, about being willing to collaborate, and being willing to work together to achieve a common goal.

Innovation is about being a continuous learner, about being willing to grow and develop, and being willing to learn from others.

Innovation is about being a positive thinker, about being willing to see the best in people, and being willing to help others.

Innovation is about being a risk taker, about being willing to take chances, and being willing to fail. Innovation is the process of taking an idea and making it happen. It’s about turning ideas into realities. It’s about creating something new, something that didn’t exist before. It’s about pushing the boundaries of what’s possible.

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When friends ask me what I actually teach people, I say: “I tell companies that they should ask people what they want before making something!”

The usual response is, “Surely they know that already? How do you make a living from pointing out the bleeding obvious?” I guess what casual observers are missing is that in most industries, it’s not obvious at all. Many companies are actually structured in a way that makes my 7 sins of innovation inevitable.

Take the Dream Programmer I mentioned. Here was a team in a big company who invited me in to discuss a new innovation they had developed. Honestly, they really had developed a product which allowed you to pick your dreams. Want to Jet ski with Brad Pitt? Done. Learn Needle Craft with Taylor Swift? It’s yours.

They were so proud of themselves, it had taken years to develop and they were ready to come to market. Strangely, only now were they considering the insight and value proposition?

So my first question was always, “Who asked you for that?” to which the reply came, “No one.” I rapidly followed with, “Then why have you done it?” to which the reply came, “Because we could.”

There’s a great scene in Jurassic Park where Jeff Goldblom and Richard Attenborough have the following exchange. “I don’t think you’re giving us our due credit. Our scientists have done things which nobody’s ever done before...” “Yeah, yeah, but your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could that they didn’t stop to think if they should.”

In many companies, the truth is that engineering and product development are so complex that it takes years of working on something to find out whether it’s even possible. Only then do businesses begin to wonder, whether or not it has an appeal. That often, by the point the idea has become a fully matured, it’s a invention of its own. The pet project of a senior manager whose career is inextricably linked to bringing it to market.

As I said in a recent Times interview, in most companies launching something is easy. It is stopping something coming to market that’s nigh on impossible!

I was once told that I misunderstood the role of marketing and product management. “It’s not driven by what the market needs”, I was told passionately, “Its role is to retrospectively back-fit an explanation against what the company was going to do anyway!”

Perhaps that’s why we all become sinners in the end and why so many innovations fail.

I can list you hundreds, maybe thousands of utterly senseless products I’ve encountered, from pills that tan you from the inside, to an iPad based potty for your toddlers. This book is full of innovations that were marketed and sold before they could create a need that didn’t exist. Somehow they believed that their ideas will not fail them out. “I can list you one of failed innovations and you’ll wince. Let’s do the impossible: something that always happens to someone else.”

But good news is that over the years I’ve proven that insights and complex technologies are not incompatible. In this book I show you the 7 sins of innovation and how to stop becoming one of them. By adopting these principles to repel the sins of innovation and start becoming customer insight driven.
Why no one ever needed a drill...

When I talk to clients about the first deadly Sin of Innovation and the danger of developers pushing their ideas down the Throat, I often take reference to the following analogy: nobody ever needed a drill; what they needed was a hole.

The saying may have been around since the 1940s, but it remains just as true today as it did then. You see, if developers fail to recognize the difference between the drill and the hole, they end up creating a form of innovation that is not insight driven.

What do I mean by this? Well, consider the following scenario:

A drill manufacturer, keen to extend their product offering, asks the customer ‘how can we improve the drills we already make?’ The customer, contemplating the existing type of drill, may say something like “maybe you could make it longer / thinner / shorter / wider; maybe put various sizes of the drill in a box to give more choice; maybe introducing a way of hanging the drill on a ladder so it’s easy to work on the wall?”

It may seem like the manufacturer is generating insight, but the only action they will perform as a result of this process is the creation of another drill. As everyone in this scenario seems utterly bewildered when the competition develop the same improvements! Why? The competition invariably asked the same customer the exact same questions and got the exact same answers.

Now consider this approach: Instead of asking the customers about the drill, the manufacturer asks about the desired outcome: “Why do you need to make a hole?”

Moving the focus away from the drill, the customer may respond with something like “I’ve just redecorated a room in my house and now I want to hang some pictures up.”

What the customer actually needs is a way of hanging the pictures that is secure, yet doesn’t leave any damage to the walls. The manufacturer, knowing this, can now go away and develop a solution. It is likely to be different from a drill, but simply asking about the desired outcome is a much better approach to breakthrough innovation. It’s obvious when you think about it, so why do so many companies fail to do this?

In my experience, a company that fails to reap the benefits of this approach is one that still wants to ask different questions; it’s because your research and ‘customer insight’ was steered in a way that demanded your existing technology. Indeed a contradictory customer response would have been hugely inconvenient.

There is nowhere that says big companies succeed in their innovation by divine right, indeed statistics show that 80% of all innovation fails to achieve its launch objectives and is removed from market. When studies have looked at why innovative products do not sell, it is the quality of the product, or lack of distribution. No, the single biggest reason is that customers do not understand what value it adds.

The company is selling a drill and the customer is looking to buy a hole.
Pushing not Pulling...

In every session I do, in every blog I write on the subject of customer insight, someone is always bound to trot out the same tired objection. “Ford said that consumers don’t know what they want and would have asked for a faster horse” or “Steve Jobs didn’t believe in customer opinion, Apple created needs when it created the iPod”. This of course is nonsense, but is a helpful belief system that legitimises everyone out there with a secret innovation god complex. It validates those little whispers in their head that says “Don’t worry that no one needs it, build it and they will come!”

For every Apple iPad there are tens of thousands of Segways, Nintendo U’s and Crystal Pepsi’s. Innovations created by big grown up, clever companies who also felt that they could push not pull.

Even within Apple, a company with a relatively small portfolio of products there has been the odd Newton, Apple Maps and Siri to suggest that not everything it touches is golden.

Its biggest successes have also built on the shoulders and market research of others, who initially developed the proposition. Think iPod. Many conventional and product managers in a know-it-all state of mind will say that Apple invented the MP3 player. For those of you like me who owned early mp3 players, you will realise that Apple refined rather developed that solution. Similarly Apple were not the first company to think of the tablet computer, the TV media streamer, the mp3 store, the laptop, the home computer nor the smart phone.

When you think about it like this, it sheds a new light on the suggestion that famously shunning market research and insight development worked for Apple. A better question would be, what new breakthrough platforms and innovations did this absence of insight create?

Which brings me to the folly which is the Apple watch.

If we subscribe to the logic that Apple dismiss customer insight as unimportant and that the customer does not know what they want, this should be a roaring success. The decision that ‘thou shalt have a smart watch’ is the absolute epitome of drill based thinking. Apple: Would you like to see an inferior version of what’s on the screen of your phone on your watch as well? Oh and bear in mind you’ll need to charge your watch every day or it will stop telling the time, requiring you to err..look at the phone in your pocket...

Consumer: No thanks, that sounds stupid!

Apple: If you sat for 2 hours in a focus group, could you eventually be coerced into coming up with some uses for our watch?

Consumer: Well I suppose if you were paying me I could help you justify your watch, but I would never actually buy it. Apple: Great, that is really useful insight. Let’s do it!

Last year only 720,000 smart watches were sold against predictions of millions. This was despite the weight of huge companies behind them, Sony, Samsung, Google, Motorola. Like is never does buy a smart watch... The Apple watch brings no new insight and a higher price tag, but admittedly a far more grandiose sense of ‘push not pull’ self entitlement.

The Apple watch is a solution looking for an insight and may very well find, just as Google Glass did, that its time is soon up.