

Vincent & Associates, Ltd.

Celebrates 20 Years of innovations that work®

By Lanny Vincent

This June, Vincent & Associates celebrated its twentieth year in business.

During the past two decades we have been privileged to work and learn with so many talented innovators in a variety of functions, companies and industries. We continue to be humbled and gratified by your confidence in the value we can bring to your innovation efforts. Two decades!

We officially began the practice in 1990 with one client: The Weyerhaeuser Company. We still work periodically with this forest products company. Though each year we add several new clients, the majority of our business each year comes from our existing clientele, several for better than 15 years including Hewlett-Packard, Sony Electronics, Advanced Micro Devices,

Rockwell Automation, ArvinMeritor, Clif Bar & Company, and Sealed Air Corporation.

While the majority of our client assignments are in the United States with companies that have a significant investment in Research & Development, innovation is all about crossing borders, both literally and figuratively. As a result, we have traveled to Europe, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Canada. Consumer electronics, semiconductors, data communications, automotive, consumer packaged goods, media, appliances, packaging, software, hardware, systems, and natural resources are some of the industries in which we have worked alongside innovators pushing the invention envelopes in and between industries.

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Lessons Learned

By Jane Gannon

The occasion of our twentieth anniversary offered us a chance to review our past annual reports and their record of the lessons we have learned with you over the years. Client assignments have been our primary instructors throughout the past two decades, and these experiences confirm that innovating is demanding and not for the faint of heart.

We thought we would share some of the key lessons we have learned as a result of our collaborations with you:

- Success is the enemy of innovation.
- Knowledge-creation sustains innovation systems. "Innovation is learning applied to creating value."
- An innovation develops best in the field, even more than in the lab.
- Even within companies serious about innovation, persistent and pesky allergies to "the new" remain.
- Nothing happens except out of relationships. Trust is the currency of relationships.
- Play is the tuition required to grow adaptive capability.
- Successful entrepreneurial action is as much about having the courage to do the most with what you have as it is about being more creative than the next guy.
- Managing interpersonal relationships (soft systems) can often be the hardest part of managing for innovation.
- A company's inventive intellectual capital can be aimed to prospectively invest in areas that both exploit the expertise of a company and address

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Celebrating 20 Years of *innovations that work*[®]

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Some of our key collaborators over the years have not only stretched our learning curve, but also pointed to new horizons in arenas related to innovation and its management. These collaborators are one way to mark some milestones over the past 20 years:

In 1994, with our associate Jim O'Shaughnessy, we started what grew into a significant practice area that continues today: strategic invention. As intellectual capital became recognized as not only an essential part of the innovation system, but also the major contributor to a company's market capitalization, our work in strategic invention grew.

In 1998, we collaborated with Lanny's mentor, Bill Wilson, and author Dick Cheverton to write *The Maverick Way*, which was published in 2000. This collection of stories of productive insubordination at Kimberly-Clark during the 1970s and 1980s became the impetus for the first Mavericks Roundtable conference. This gathering of innovation practitioners eventually grew and morphed into the Innovation Practitioners Network—conferences where veteran innovators come together to compare notes, advance their knowledge, and periodically collaborate to contribute original insights to the field of innovation management.

Five years after *The Maverick Way* went to press we published an article entitled *Innovation Midwives* in the Industrial Research Institute's *Research•Technology Management* journal. Larry Pillote and Dick Sperry (Sealed Air), Curt Schauer (Logitech), Greg Blythe (Hewlett-Packard) and Bruce Biehoff (Whirlpool) have been a

few of the thought leaders in this network who continue to contribute significantly to the body of knowledge.

In 2005, we met and began our collaboration with Stuart Brown, M.D., founder of the National Institute for Play. Stuart helped us learn that play of all things may be missing in our innovation efforts—especially in older, performance-driven companies. Stuart also brings forth countless insights from play science, which have directly improved clients' innovation efforts.

In 2006, we started seeing and feeling that the word “innovation” had morphed and become almost generic and overused, partly due to the flood tide of publications and interest in innovation. This flood tide has given us occasion to reaffirm the more persistent foundations of a sustainable innovation management system: (1) invention and insight, (2) knowledge creation, (3) adaptive capability, (4) systems thinking, and (5) creative collaboration.

Since the end of 2008, the economic recession—or is it an economic revision?—has forced us all to look even more carefully at the foundations. The need to innovate has not lessened any, but the need to reduce the risk of failure associated with innovation efforts has intensified. This requires approaches that are both bottom-up and top-down. It requires sponsors who refuse to succumb to making trade-offs, who rely instead upon the inventive and adaptive capability of their innovator community. It also requires leaders to clearly state not only that innovations are needed, but also where and why they are needed.

What does the future hold for innovation management in the next 20 years? Will innovation management become an accepted cross-disciplinary function, much the way marketing has evolved over the past 30 years? Or will innovation management remain deliberately under-organized to enable it to operate more freely, crossing both political boundaries within the corporation as well as forging connections across borders outside the corporation's conceptual, technological and marketplace domains? Whatever the future portends, we will enjoy engaging, participating and learning in this future with you. □

Lessons Learned

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anticipated paths of development.

- Combining insights discovered from external investigations with insights from internal lessons learned can be a powerful approach for transforming intelligence into innovation.
- Story making and storytelling are essential to perceiving both threats and opportunities on the horizon.
- Content precedes process, just as form follows function. Innovating is a process driven by the innovator's clarity and conviction in an entrepreneurial opportunity.
- Pay attention to subtle surprises in the market, the development lab, and in the market of your existing products or your competitors products. These are often the most reliable signposts and sources of where to innovate next.
- Leaving room for experimentation in your strategic plan acknowledges the potential in the unanticipated and reflects an appropriate humility regarding the inescapable uncertainties of the future.
- Role definition, clarification and improvisation can reduce chaos that comes with change-induced uncertainty.
- Success in overcoming the not-invented-here syndrome comes in part from innovators ability to step back and share both the credit and the authorship.
- Give yourself permission to fail so that real learning can occur.
- Manage like a (tough) loving parent, neither too permissive nor dogmatic about early performance.
- Instead of people looking for a formula for how-to do innovation, we need innovators who are inspired by necessity.

After all, as the old saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. □

R. S. V. P.

Please send us your thoughts on this issue of *Innovating Perspectives*.

We appreciate your ideas and we enjoy hearing from you.

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