



Beyond Emerson and the “Field of Dreams”: Another Look at Innovation and Marketing

Dennis J. Cahill

President, North Union Associates, Inc.

Abstract. This note explores a new paradigm for thinking of innovation and innovating behavior, claiming that the Emerson/Field of Dreams paradigm so often used as justification for producing new highly-engineered products is a cause of the high failure rate for new products and services.

Keywords: mousetrap, “marketing concept”, innovation, product development.

If a man write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mouse-trap than his neighbor, tho’ he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door. Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

This observation has become the standard paradigm for entrepreneurs: innovation is the key to success, and innovation will out. Our society praises innovation and invention. Academics state that entrepreneurial careers can be lengthened by innovation and the serial-founding of enterprises (Ronstadt, 1988).

Trudel (1994) tells the tale of one of the first assignments undertaken by his consulting firm, which was to help a “quintessential technology venture: very technocentric, with an innovative but eccentric founder.” Its product (which Trudel with unintended irony calls its “better mousetrap”) was both “clever and cute”, had good early sales, but the sales level never approached the “hockey-stick” curve which the company wanted. Trudel did some research, including talking to customers. He told one “I don’t see how you can use this product.” The customer confessed, “I can’t, but I like it anyway.” Trudel’s conclusion was that the product was useless.

However, the engineers were “irritated” that their marketing minions were not performing, that the better mousetrap had been built...so where were the people? This is an indication that the “traditional high-tech venture mode” is incorrect.

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1. This “quotation”, invariably attributed to Emerson, may not be by him at all. The earliest statement of it is in a book entitled *Borrowings*, published by the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, CA in 1889. Sarah B. Yule claims to have heard the statement and written it down at a lecture “probably in 1871” given by Emerson in Oakland. Tenuous attribution at best, but “everyone” knows he said it.

Trudel (1994) states that "too many high-tech firms are bringing out overhyped products that sell well to the lunatic fringe, but then peter out because the product doesn't fill a real need for the rest of us."

I have consulted with over thirty entrepreneurs, almost all of whom have articulated this Emersonian paradigm with respect to their enterprise or product. They have a "perfect" product or service in mind; if they can only sell it to "one percent of the people who need it", they will be rich. No research, no marketing will be needed – just a story on the news and "the world will beat a path to my door." This is the "Build it and they will come" at its most dangerous.² Without marketing, "they" may never come, or may take many years to come.

Many innovative product categories become stuck in a long "introductory" period where sales do not rise to the desired level – never mind the "hockey stick" sales curve mentioned above. Microwave ovens took over 20 years from their first commercial introduction to their commercial acceptance; it took massive social reorganization and frozen-food manufacturers changing their containers from foil to plastic to make microwaves a kitchen necessity. Answering machines took 15, VCRs took 20 (and 20 years after acceptance they are obsolescent as DVDs take over). Steven Schnaars (1994) devotes much of a book to discussing this problem for innovators. But even worse are the very good products that simply are overwhelmed by later products better marketed: Where today is VisiCalc, swamped by Excel? Where today is WordPerfect, swamped by Word? Where today is the BetaMax VCR format, in engineering terms a far superior format than the VHS format which ultimately triumphed only to be swamped by the digital video recorder – TiVO? Where today is the Apple Newton Personal Digital Assistant, swamped by Blackberries?

Actually, what we need is a return to an old paradigm, one which has been neglected in both the academic and practitioner literature for years. It is called the Marketing Concept, which was first articulated almost 50 years ago (McKitterick, 1957). The Marketing Concept states that "meeting customer needs as a method for profit making needs to be the philosophy of the enterprise". Or, put more crudely, "it is easier to sell someone what they want to buy than to make them buy what you make".

Despite the intuitive appeal of the Marketing Concept, there has been resistance to a customer-need orientation as an organizing principle for new-product development in high-tech: users do not know what they want, new products must be developed by engineers and then exposed to the unwashed (read the comic strip "Dilbert" for a week to be exposed to viewpoint at its most supercilious or any of the Dilbert books on management). The Marketing

2. "Build it and they will come", of course, is the phrase from the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams* based on the book *Shoeless Joe* (Kinsella, 1982) where the voice of the narrator's father told him to build an empty baseball field in the middle of his cornfield in Iowa and Shoeless Joe Jackson and other dead ball players would show up. People elide over the fact that the players showed up and played for weeks before the first paying customer (which would happen after the book or movie actually ended, requiring us to take their appearance on faith).

Concept, like “innovation” is not new (Stewart, 2006). In fact, Kantor (2006) talks about the “Classic Innovation Traps”, implying at least, that we have been down this road before, perhaps many times.

It is as though the seminal work by von Hippel (1986) on going to one’s lead users for product ideas did not exist, rather than having been in the literature for almost two decades. I have often heard that it is impossible to ask high-tech customers what they want. Brown (1992) states that if, “...as is the case of many innovations, no market [currently] exists, and if potential customers are unable adequately to understand the product, then market research can provide only ‘negative answers’.” Two leading texts on Entrepreneurship – Kuratko and Hodgetts (1998) and Hisrich, Peters and Shepherd (2006) talk about marketing philosophies and ways of organizing the entrepreneurial firm. Kuratko and Hodgetts (page 230) state flatly that a “consumer-driven orientation [not quite the same thing as The Marketing Concept] is often most effective, although many ventures do not adopt it.” Hisrich, Peters and Shepherd present various philosophies as fairly-equally valid and potentially equally-successful, primarily depending upon the background of the entrepreneur and the market in which the firm operates. Von Hippel (1986) and Brown (1992) primarily focus on “industrial” or highly-engineered goods; this is the very area where organizing around The Marketing Concept is weakest.

The correct research question is not whether a *specific* product or product idea can be tested, but whether there is a need and desire for the solution to be offered. Many new products seem to their users to offer no significant advantage over what they are currently using; even if the differences are qualitatively or quantitatively observable, the question of whether they are worth the price asked in both cash and time to learn or configure need to be accounted for.

It is my contention that the Marketing Concept has validity as a way to organize new-product development efforts so that both customers and firms will be better off. To a certain extent this emphasis on the Marketing Concept pits me against some of the Product Development literature which emphasizes product superiority as the criterion which most distinguishes new product successes from failures. I am perfectly willing to admit that it may take a superior product to win market acceptance, product superiority does not guarantee acceptance. Further, it is possible to gain market acceptance with a less-than-superior product which is marketed effectively, particularly if the marketplace does not *want* superiority on the particular dimension or does not perceive that the product is superior. The only “superiority” that matters is in the customer’s mind, not in the specifications which the engineers and product designers draw up. While the headiness of the high-tech arena may well shift corporate attitudes towards “if it can be done, it *must* be done,” this is usually a serious mistake. No product can long survive without marketplace support; the management that recognizes this fact may be spared the burden of costly product failures.

How can the entrepreneurial venture avoid falling into the "Field of Dreams" mindset and bring a customer orientation, the Marketing Concept, foremost? It is a constant struggle to fight off the engineers; particularly if the entrepreneurs are engineers themselves. I am currently consulting with a firm that is working on a line extension without having done any research on whether customers would want it or use it if it were presented to them, while at the same time putting off an extension to the same line of software that has been asked for by two or three existing customers. The extension currently being developed is much easier to do ("if we *can* do it, we *must* do it") and will thus require many fewer resources and be ready to market in a much shorter period of time than the other – but to my mind has a higher probability of market failure. This is a pure production-driven philosophy, one which an engineer-driven company is quite comfortable with. To a large extent, as all the authors cited have either explicitly or implicitly stated, organizing along a customer-driven philosophy – using The Marketing Concept – requires the firm and its managers to manage from outside their zone of comfort. The Marketing Concept cedes control of the firm's product choices to the market and not management.

Product-driven firms would be much better advised to be market followers than leaders. Let another firm come out with the really new product and then develop new forms that fill in the empty spots or respond to the negative comments of the reviewers. In a certain sense this is what happened to the products mentioned above. BetaMax may have been technically superior to VHS, but Sony refused to let go of the format and VHS quickly had hundreds more pre-recorded movies, which turned out to be the leading use of the VCR. VisiCalc's developers tied themselves to the Apple II and were late in developing a version of the IBM PC; they missed the tidal wave of sales to business. WordPerfect may have been a "superior" word processing program (I would disagree, having used it), but when Microsoft Word came bundled with computers, inside Office (albeit in a stripped-down version), WordPerfect simply could not compete. "Superiority" is not a marketing term; market share is. And winning a larger market share than one's competitors requires the firm to listen to customers.

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