



It all began with a wire mesh grill, which morphed into a park bench. Note that the photos do not show the primal generation.

Markets: How to find ideas for new products

(September 2009) One of the more popular anecdotes on chance discoveries of new products tells how wire mesh park benches came into being (see photo). Purportedly first invented by a company in the business of producing protective metal grills - the quantum leap from the grill to the high-end metropolitan furniture was the result of a customer complaint: a failed attempt to bend the grill while hoping to turn it into a bench, whereby the grill broke.

After some to and fro as to the whether the claim was justified, the producer recognized the product's potential: henceforth grills were produced of stronger and more lasting material and given a special coating to make them more durable. Viola - the wire grill park bench was born.

Paradoxically, companies should take customers' attempts of misappropriation seriously and always attempt to see potential innovation in the act.

Insight no. 1: try to learn from your

customers and put away the professional blinkers.

This also holds true for inquiries relating to products you do not presently produce or have on offer. Interesting to note that the customer obviously thinks you have or may have the product he seeks or the know-how to produce it. Scientists call this hidden potential - potential which the company knows nothing of. A request, which cannot be filled, also shows that there is a market for the product in question.

Insight no. 2: listen attentively to the customer's questions. Active listening is an effective method to discover hidden potential in an enterprise.

This leads us to **insight no. 3:** Listen to the employees and ask them to share their ideas. Employees know the enterprise from the inside out.

Back to the customer: occasionally a customer will return and praise the product or craftsmanship. Delve more deeply - ask what exactly impressed the customer. Was it the quality of the

product, working within schedule, or was it the friendliness of the team? This is a golden opportunity to discover the strengths of your enterprise.

Insight no. 4: formulated as a question would be - why did the customer buy your product and not someone else's? Make sure to put the answers to good use. Also make sure to emphasize your strengths in your exposé. Conversely, try to iron out your weak points by avoiding constantly recurring mistakes.

It isn't always necessary to reconstruct a product to adapt to a new idea. Hidden potential can also adhere to a by-product or a secondary aspect. A good example taken from today's telecommunication branch is the SMS: it was a technical by-product, albeit one that has turned into enormous profit for providers. **Insight no. 5:** Analyze your products to discover what more they can achieve.

Often it is simply a matter of replacing one material by another, e.g. a



Many more products can be followed back to the original product like fences in many variations.

Photos: Peter Becker

bathub, originally made of steel, is now produced out of stone. However this type of innovation only opens corner markets.

Only mass production opens the door to mass marketing. And the hypothesis behind this truth is that the average customer seeks not a particular product but rather a means to an end.

Insight no. 6: Try to find out what your customer is looking for when he visits your enterprise. Only on the basis of this knowledge will you be in a position to fulfil his wishes.

Let us conclude with a few words on the culture surrounding enterprises with a high level of innovation. New

products require an adequate frame. A speech by the CEO is not sufficient, if not to say counterproductive.

One of the main requirements of a fruitful ambience is that the heads of enterprise declare innovation to be everyone's business. This is not achieved by a memo but rather by expounding the necessity and usefulness of innovation in such a way that every employee gains insight in its value.

The procedure must unroll according to a fixed plan. **Step 1: in the beginning allow for diversity.** In the beginning only ideas are thrown into the arena, without losing even a single thought on feasibility or costs. No idea is too eccentric or crazy.

Step 2: this is where a **handful of ideas are chosen** by the teams and analyzed more closely.

Step 3: before **production of a marketable prototype can begin**, a reliable budget must be set up and employees delegated to fill key positions.

Step 4 introduces the **full circle phase**, in which blinkers must be stowed away and hidden potential fostered.

This, in a nutshell, is what economists call „living“ enterprise, meaning that a company must go with the times and innovation.