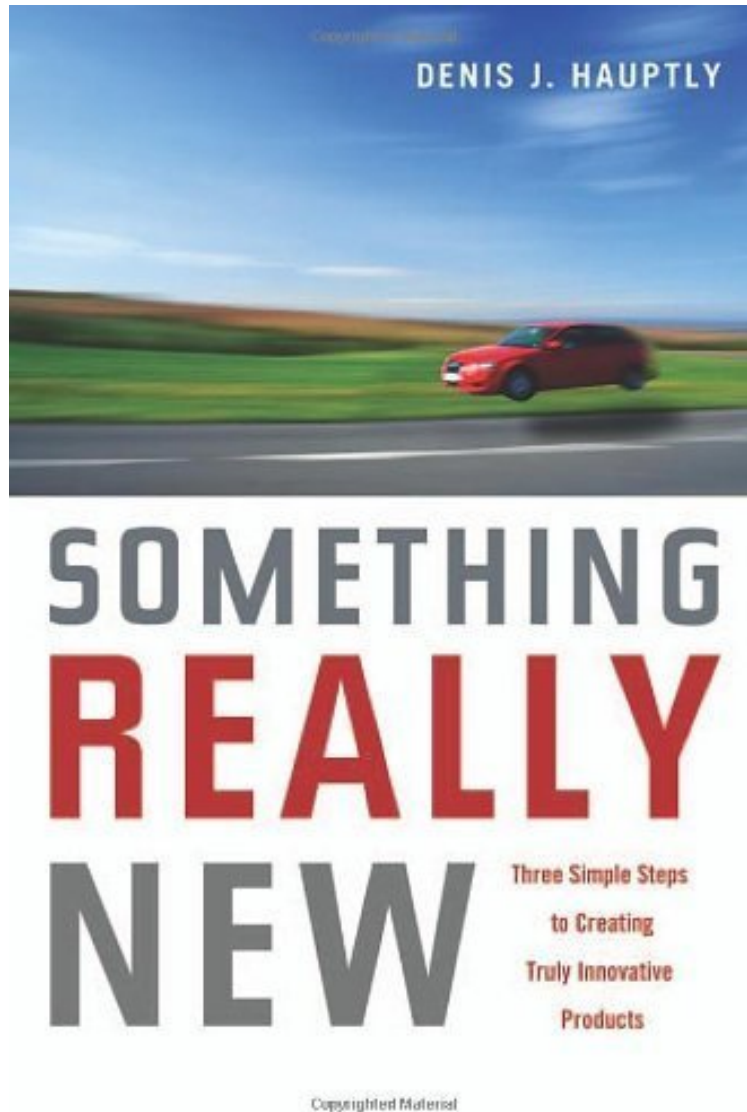


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# Something Really New: Three Simple Steps to Creating Truly Innovative Products

Denis J. Hauptly

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"Product innovation is the key to business growth. But many books deal with innovation from the business process view alone, or confuse innovation with creativity. Written by an innovation expert whose products generate more than one billion dollars in annual revenue, *Something Really New* introduces a straightforward but powerful framework for creating exciting new product and service concepts . . . simply by asking three essential questions. From an electronic hotel kiosk that provides return airline boarding passes for guests, to something as mundane as the evolution of the toaster, the book provides entertaining, illuminating examples that show how to determine what customer needs aren't being met, using simple methods to arrive at revolutionary conclusions. For example, "'What is a product really used for?'" The question may seem elementary, but the right answer is far from obvious. This and other key questions demonstrate how readers can move beyond mere market research to get to the root of real innovation. Practical and eye-opening, this book shows companies how to take the kind of startling leaps that will leave their competition in the dust. "

"Hauptly's simple and straightforward approach will enable organizations to quickly and inexpensively create new products and services that have real value." - Publishers Weekly "Engagingly and humorously written and filled with clear examples and constructive approaches, *Something Really New* could just as easily be called *Something Really Useful*." In itself, the book is an innovation that will help ease the previously daunting task of creating products that spark and sustain bottom-line growth." - InnovationWatch.com "Something Really New is a quick read, peppered with anecdotes and examples." - Industry Week "This practical approach identifies likely obstacles to innovation and offers proven tricks to overcome them." -Entrepreneur "The book contains valuable insights for managing innovators." --Fort Worth Star-Telegram About the Author Denis J. Hauptly (Minneapolis, MN) is the Vice President of New Product Development for Westlaw, and has held product innovation positions for Westlaw or its parent company, The Thomson Corporation, for the past 12 years. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 3 But First You Have to Ask the Right Question ONE SUNDAY IN 2006, THE NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD PUZZLE offered the following clue for a five-letter word: 'Son of Henry and father of Henry II.' I passed by the clue until I had a letter entered from another clue. The word began with 'E.' Well, that made no sense. King Henry of England surely had a son with a common English name, and I could think of none that began with E and was five letters long. Aha, I thought, 'I've been fooled. It's not English monarchs we are talking about here, but French or Portuguese (think Prince Henry the Navigator) monarchs. I am not an expert on common names or monarchical names in either nation, so I waited until I had another letter. The word ended with 'L.' Huh? What kind of name is this? I had no clue. Actually, I did have a clue. But I was reading it wrong. One more letter added: ED L. Now I knew, but only because I grew up in the 1950s and recalled that the Ford Motor Company's disastrous car, the Edsel, was named after a member of the Ford family, Edsel Ford—the son of Henry Ford and the father of Henry Ford II. Faced with a problem on which I had an incomplete set of facts (as we almost always are), I asked the wrong question. Because I asked the wrong question, I could not come up with the right answer. Innovators have to do better than that. They are doing their job right when they ask the right question first. But that's hindsight, you say. 'You knew it was the wrong question once you had the right answer. I want to ask the right question first and not waste my time and my company's resources chasing after the answer to the wrong question.' Fair enough. And there is a method that will help you achieve that goal, but let us be sure that we understand the concept first. All of us start from the comfortable. I am familiar with English history, so when I was faced with a question about two persons named Henry and Henry II, I went to where I was comfortable: England. That's a natural reaction, and very often it will lead us to a right result. But not always. Getting to the Right Question To get to the right question more certainly, we have to get outside our own skins and take a detached view of the question. That is actually very hard to do. Here's why. When faced with a question like the crossword clue, people tend to break down into three different types. People of the first type take the question literally, go into their comfort area, and come up with a single possible answer (e.g., it must be the father of King Henry II of England). Once they reach that answer, all other options are precluded. This type of person, upon learning that Henry II was actually the son of Geoffrey of Anjou, assumes that the crossword editor has made a mistake and puts down the puzzle in self-righteous annoyance. She may even write a letter to the editor. People of the second type acknowledge at some level that there may be several ways of approaching the problem, but believe that the odds heavily favor the one that they (coincidentally) are most comfortable with. However, upon being faced with an impossible answer (Geoffrey does not fit in five spaces on the puzzle and does not begin with E), these people will realize that there is a trick involved and will start methodically pursuing the other options in the order that is most comfortable. Eventually they will sort out the result. People of the third type make no assumptions at all about the question. These people look at the question and say, 'Henry? Which Henry? Hmmm. They are trying to pull a fast one on me here. They are trying to make me

jump to a conclusion that it is the comfortable Henry. I won't do that. What are the other options? The first group of people will never innovate. They never ask the right question except by blind luck. We will call them Linear People. They move methodically from step to step, but they are unconcerned about the possibility that their reasoning path started with a false assumption and are unlikely to reexamine that assumption. Such people are often very good at math. People in the second group may innovate, but they will get there later than the competition. Let us label them Eventual Innovators. This is not a put-down. These people are the heart and soul of any innovation activity because there are so few people in the third category. Eventual Innovators start with assumptions but, when faced with empirical weaknesses in those assumptions, will start over. Many scientists fall into this group. People in the third group, whom I will call Unassuming Persons, can innovate constantly. They really have no strong assumptions. That makes them curious about everything, and they have a sense of endless wonder. There are not many Unassuming Persons out there because very few people are actually able to be that detached from the assumptions that help us all get through life. It is not surprising to discover that these people often have backgrounds in the arts. So most innovators will fall into the second category. These people need to develop a regular habit of challenging the conventional wisdom. This takes energy and courage, but it takes a process as well. This book gives three questions, and the Eventual Innovators should put these questions on a wall in their office because they must constantly remind themselves of the need to get back to basics and confront these questions, just as was necessary in the crossword problem. Getting into the habit of asking these questions will save time and effort and dollars. But that is not the end of the story. Asking the right question is not enough. It is necessary, but not sufficient. To get things right, we have to have the right answers. Finding the Right Answers Let us take the question from Step 1: What tasks is the product really used for? It is entirely possible to answer that question incorrectly. Someone could still look at a faucet and answer it by saying, "Customers use this to get water." We know from Chapter 2 that they actually use kitchen faucets to: Wash hands. Wash dishes. Wash food. Obtain specific amounts of water for cooking. But getting to those options required some work on our part. We had to look at a kitchen faucet and try to make the distinction between functions and tasks. We had to step back from our own biases and assumptions and look at something we had seen a million times in a brand new light. We might have done that work well, or we might have done it poorly. How can we know we have gotten to the right answer? Actually, there are two ways we can know: obviousness and observation. Let us take a look at each. Obviousness If you want to innovate, obvious answers to the questions asked in this book are never true. Let me repeat that. If you want to innovate, obvious answers to the questions asked in this book are never true. Not once. Under no circumstances. Here's why. The obvious answer will always reflect the existing paradigm. If it is obvious, it is obvious because it fits neatly into the way we view the world. It may extend the product in some way. It may make water flow faster or make it shut off automatically after a certain period of time. Those changes would be positive and would add slightly to the product's value, but again, these are more mutations than innovations. You, as an innovator, want to move beyond these types of changes into a complete rethinking of the product so that it serves its tasks with maximum efficiency, not just with marginal improvement. Why describe your product as "better" when you can describe it as "best"? Let us look at an example. Assume that the year is 1960 or so and you are running the Subway Token Department for the New York City Transit Authority. You are conscientious about your work, and you decide to ask customers for their opinions on your subway tokens. Well, it turns out that they do not like your dime-sized tokens. It is worse than that: They hate your tokens. Your tokens are so small that they get lost in pockets and purses. You have to keep them separate from your coins or else you will be sorting through dimes and pennies to pull out a token. They slip from your hand when you are getting ready to put them in the slot. You have to wait in line to buy them. There is really nothing good to be said about these tokens. What can you do? The quick fix (and the one that was actually used starting in 1970) is to change the size of the token. Make it big enough to stick out in a pocket full of change and easier to grasp at the same time. This is the obvious solution, and it suffers from all the characteristics of obvious solutions. It is not an innovation; it is merely a design change along the path of the existing paradigm. Customers will be somewhat happier because the change will reduce some of their problems. But unless you give a token a two-inch diameter, the larger tokens will still be somewhat difficult to distinguish, and you will still have to wait in line to buy them. They make the task of entering the subway somewhat more efficient, but there is still a lot of room for improvement. The innovative answer is to say that the problem is with tokens themselves. They are inherently like coins, and so they will always be confusing. They are good for only one trip, and so you will frequently need to buy more. Moreover, they limit your pricing structure to "one token fits all." When we look at the task involved and reject the obvious solution, we are forced to ask ourselves, "How would I do this in a world without tokens? How can I avoid coinlike objects, allow multiple trips with the same entry device, and, ideally, give myself more pricing flexibility?" The innovative answer (implemented in 1976 in the Washington, D.C., Metro and, finally, in 2003 in New York) is a debit card. It is easy to buy and provides for many trips. It is not going to be confused with a coin, and it allows an infinite variety of pricing options. Users save time and effort. The subway system does so as well: It employs fewer people since it does not have to sell and collect tokens anymore.<sup>2</sup> But this answer, this

innovation, did not take place and could not take place until the paradigm was shifted, until the underlying assumption was abandoned. With subway tokens, the underlying assumption was that the problem was in the design of the tokens. In fact, the problem was with the use of tokens as a means of gaining entry to the subway. The user wanted to complete the task of getting on a train, but the product owners were focused on something entirely different—optimizing the design of subway tokens. So the obvious is not the innovative. But it should not be totally discarded. As we will see later on in Chapter 10, “The Human Factor,” you can draw a distinction between BIG innovations and small innovations. If enough small innovations are added to a product, they may make a significant change in the value proposition, so these innovations are not to be ignored. But we get further, faster with touchdowns than with field goals, so when you see an obvious improvement, do not settle for it. The obvious should be the fallback position, not the starting position. Observation So much of innovation has to do with observation. If we see someone filling a pot with water from a kitchen faucet and our observation is, “Faucets supply water,” we have no place to go. But if we stop and say, “What is really going on here? What is this person trying to accomplish? How can I help him accomplish that?” then we have a genuine chance of breaking through to new ground. Just as observation is a key element of innovative ideas, so too is it the best testing ground for those ideas because reality is the best testing ground for almost anything. Does your answer to the question fit with what people actually do? Can you observe the behavior of people using your product and see if your answer is correct? Does your innovation solve old problems, but create new ones? Let us go back to our kitchen faucet. One of the proposed innovations was premeasured water. Push a button once for one cup, twice for two cups, and so on. That sounds right, but its correctness depends on whether people actually do things the way they are supposed to do them. The recipe calls for three cups of water. Does the cook actually measure three cups, or does she simply put roughly three cups of water into the pot? If the measurement for one recipe is rough, is that true of all or most recipes? I make bread by hand. I make rough measurements of my flour and water because as I knead the bread by hand, I know from a touch trained through making hundreds of loaves of bread whether more water or more flour is needed. In that case, rough measurements are fine. If, on the other hand, I made bread by machine, I would measure quite precisely because the ratio is important and I would have no chance to adjust it once the machine starts kneading. So if one is making bread by machine or cooking rice (which does require precise measurement), the exact amount of water may matter. But if one is making pasta, a little extra water probably will not hurt anything. And if a little extra water won’t hurt anything, the value of our innovation is low. If we observe enough cooks preparing enough recipes, we will begin to get a sense of whether our proposed innovation makes sense. Does it add value because it would be used all the time by a good percentage of the potential users? Or is it just a “feature” that may help to sell the product but won’t actually be used (or valued) much in the end? This latter situation arises quite often. An innovation is made that is undeniably superior to the old way of doing things. But the old behavior is deeply ingrained and well understood, so the motivation to change one’s behavior has to be very high for change to actually take place. Some years ago, a software product that I was managing moved from green dots on a black screen to a graphical user interface (GUI). Over the next few years, all new development was done in the GUI, but some customers still stuck to the earlier version. Eventually the day came when we had to pull the plug on that old product. It would strain your credulity if I described the outpouring of anger and anguish we received over that decision—even though we were offering the users something that was enormously superior at absolutely no cost to them. People who have gotten used to doing things a certain way are often uninterested in investing in change, and a change that may seem easy for the innovator may in fact be quite difficult for the user who is a linear thinker. Observation will tell you whether you have a problem here or not. And observation does not have to be expensive. Prototyping can usually be done inexpensively. Even describing an innovation or using good drawings can evoke a reaction from users. That reaction may tell you whether it is wise to invest more funds in the innovation or not. If you do invest more and can create a working model or prototype, then you can engage in more objective observations. The users will tell you whether they like the innovation or not and whether they would actually use it or not. That observed information is a lot more valuable than what comes out of most focus groups or surveys. It allows the product developer to see at once what is good and what is bad about an idea. It can be the springboard for many other ideas as well. Of course, what is being described here is the scientific method. You develop a thesis. Then you create an experiment to test the thesis. You observe the results of the experiment and compare them to the thesis. You publish the details of your experiment and its results. Then you gather criticism of your experiment from others. Finally, you see whether the experiment can be duplicated by others with the same result. The great virtue of the scientific method is its objectivity. If the experiment proves the thesis to be false, the scientist moves on. Would that this were so in the world of product innovation! If you have done product development work for any period of time, you will have seen developers who were so taken by their own idea that they:

1. Did not test at all.
2. Tested in such a way as to ensure that the results matched the thesis.
3. Ignored the negative results and latched on firmly to some isolated positive statements.
4. Transferred learnings from another market to a new one without validating them in the new one.
5. Did all of the above and created a great press release as well.

Such shenanigans are entirely understandable. They are usually defended by statements like, “I have been in this market for 10 years, and I know this market,” or some other form of self-

validation. But they can lead to ridiculous results. I have a colleague who is legally blind. He performs a highly technical job through the use of special equipment. For instance, he has a computer screen that enlarges letters many times. He recently informed me that there was a new cell phone available for people in his situation. It had large keys and a larger screen, and it magnified the characters on the screen. This was great. Some product developer somewhere had recognized that there was a market that was not being served and moved in to serve it. Just one thing: It came equipped with a camera. Even the briefest of test periods would have shown that there are not a lot of blind photographers, so the camera was superfluous, and leaving it out would have saved the manufacturer and the buyer a few bucks. This is a serious problem, and it is a cultural problem. Cultural problems are particularly intractable, but these problems must be confronted. It is very rare that the financial decision to create a new product is based on deep knowledge of the market research. It is more often based on a summary prepared by the product advocate. The fox not only guards the henhouse, but is the only source that management has for what is going on in it.