

Peanut Butter Pop-Tarts



In a recent WSJ article, "Is a Peanut Butter Pop-Tart an Innovation", some serious points were made about the innovation journey many companies have embarked upon over the last 5-10 years during which time the word "innovation" has become a commodity. The article mentioned that Kellogg CEO John Bryant called this product one of the cereal company's most important products of 2013.

Just because it was a significant product (I assume made a lot of money), does that necessarily qualify as an innovation? Is this an incremental, valuable new product (I might ask why did it take so long for someone to "discover" that people liked peanut butter) or an innovation? Products such as "premium" potash, higher alcohol beer, and tattoos for pets have been described as innovations. To quote from the article, "Most CEO's now spray the word "innovation" as if it were an air freshener".

In our TRIZ and innovation sessions, we make the point that a 10-20% improvement is something for which there are no special tools needed. Listening to current customers, good engineering and troubleshooting, etc. can get you there. We use TRIZ when we need something far more significant. The danger in this "dumbing down" of the definition of innovation is that it will prevent us from seeking the dramatic changes in products, processes, and organizations that really do produce breakthroughs. We MUST make a distinction or the challenge of what we need to do will be lost.

In this same article, it was pointed out that in a survey of 1500 executives, the Boston Consulting Group, two thirds of them ranked themselves on "innovation" at least 7 on a 1-10 scale. Don't we have to ask, if changing the flavor of a food is truly innovation, how serious is this self-evaluation? In thinking about Kellogg, wouldn't a Pop-Tart, or when eaten with something else, that reduced cholesterol or blood pressure, be a true innovation? That would require more than just optimizing blending equipment or more accurately surveying customers.

As you look back over the past year and into next year, ask yourself, have you REALLY defined innovation in the right way? Have you sufficiently challenged your organization to ask breakthrough questions and not incremental questions? And if not, how will you communicate this? And what tools will you use?

The latest book on TRIZ problem solving ("The Ideal Result: What It Is and How to Achieve It") is now available through the Altshuller TRIZ Institute at a discounted price:
<http://www.aitriz.org/online-store/triz-online-store/books/ideal-result-detail>

Our next public TRIZ classes for ASME/AIChE are in Minneapolis, April 28-30 and Houston, June 2-4:
<https://www.asme.org/products/courses/triz--the-theory-of-inventive-problem-solving>

We wish all of you a rewarding New Year!