

“Once you give up integrity, the rest is a piece of cake”

--Larry Hagman on the TV Show “Dallas”

How often have you thought about your faucet lately? Had a brainstorming session with your family about it? Asked your spouse what he/she did with it today? Contracted for a market research study on faucets? The rest of this has been triggered, in part, by some discussions with one of the major leading plumbing fixture companies in the US.

What if you're IN the faucet business? What do you think about? How to make a faucet that won't rust? How to make its internals so reliable that you never get a drippy faucet? How to combine hot and cold water in one faucet (a TRIZ principle by the way)? How to choose a metal that is more attractive? How to shape the faucet differently so that it's more attractive? All these are right and more that you can think of. So if you're the new product development manager or engineering manager of a faucet company, you've got a long list of things that are already in your domain. All of these are on the lower left quadrant of one of those 2X2 strategy diagrams that you've seen hundreds of.

But assume for a moment that you're in one of these jobs and you've been given the freedom (or taken it!) to think "outside" this box. Let's also assume you've had some very basic TRIZ training and learned that what's important is not the product (the faucet), but the FUNCTION it provides. You know how difficult this is to state and get out of the product box. Let me suggest that a faucet is an interface between a user and water. This interface, in a typical company, is constrained to a conventional vision--the current faucet. However, if we redefined our business as improving the interface between the consumer and water, or possibly think about all the ways a consumer interfaces with water, what new product or business ideas could we come up with? Let us know how we can assist you in starting your TRIZ journey!

Let me suggest a few and you think of some more:

1. Water filters
2. Flavored water
3. Detergent additives to water for dish washers
4. Personalized water temperature (or something else) automatically provided based on knowledge of who opens the valve
5. Automatic shutoff after a certain time to save money
6. Cosmetic additives for dry skin (again personalized)
7. An automatic calling of a plumber if there's a leak
8. Automatic shutoff if a sink fills
9. Automatic addition of wash detergent based on where the water is flowing
10. An automatic alert light when a high water (cost) rate might be occurring.

The point here is NOT that a faucet company should do all these things, but they at least need to think about them, because people who are NOT in the faucet business may see these same opportunities and provide (and patent) a new product or service that leaves the faucet manufacturer out in the cold or at least at the bottom of the profit food chain.

I am reminded of a part of a Boeing annual report from many years ago where they openly discussed the fact that they were in the transportation business and an airplane was only one way of accomplishing that. They decided there was enough long term growth in this business that they did not need to think about building cars, for example. The point is that they thought about it consciously and made a decision.

What is the FUNCTION that your product or service provides? How could expansion of this thought generate possible new business ideas? Talk about this in your next staff or group meeting and think about the possibilities. People are buying your product or service, not because it looks nice, has a low cost, or is available at the local store. They are buying it because it provides a function. As soon as someone finds a better way to supply that function, you'll have lots to worry about.