



# Keeping innova product

By: Dr George Collings

**Being a student of history, I especially love to read about unique individuals who set the tone or thinking of many people. Patrick Henry, a founding father of the United States, gave a rousing speech with freedom a focus saying: "Give me liberty or give me death." This changed the heart of the people and gave new direction to the start of a nation.**

In business, we sometimes hear something similar: "Give me innovation or our business could die." Is that true? Does innovation and the process of innovating new products directly tie into the growth of a company? The simple answer is yes! Without a good innovation process, a business will not be leading the market, but looking over their shoulders at innovating competitors.

## Focus on three things

Years ago, my thinking was challenged to focus on three things: 1. Protecting or maintaining the business; 2. Growing new market share; and 3. Growing new markets. Everything I did should be connected to these. Many companies have suffered for not focusing on these three points and creating stale approaches. Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, was known to say to his employees: "Swim upstream – go the other way." His efforts led to a huge, worldwide empire.

The pet food business is stronger than ever. It is growing faster than other food segments and shows every opportunity of continued expansion. We have seen several brands and products 'come out of nowhere' to become several hundred million dollar companies. In recent years, brands like Greenies, Royal Canin, Blue Buffalo, Waggin' Train, Lickety Stik, Earthborn, Higgins, Innova, et cetera have tried unique technologies, processes, nutritional focuses, packaging or sales deliveries to build innovative products to build new share and markets. I went to a large pet industry show recently and counted over 23 new food brands.

All of these had similarities and very few of them had distinctly different messages or claims. However, there were a few uniquely different or innovative approaches. The pet industry has unique opportunities in nutrition, food, treats, supplements, toys, behavioural products, veterinary, et cetera. The company that approaches it with 'fresh' ideas and encourages an innovative process will

become the leaders of segments and channels.

## Building innovation in a company

The definition of 'innovation' suggests the introduction of something new or different to the market. This may be a new product, process, service, sales mechanism or packaging. What stops many companies from being innovative? Innovation is a corporate skill-set that must be cultivated from the top of the organisation throughout all groups. Leaders must do everything in their capacity to do the following:

### 1. Remove an 'idea-killing' environment.

Killing ideas is easy to do and quite normal in many companies. If you promote risk taking, people are willing to make mistakes and try new ways of doing things. However, you will find some people quickly voicing how things cannot be done – thus promoting an idea-killing environment. Some people are talented at killing ideas, quickly killing growth and changing the

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mood of an organisation. Idea-killing statements like these must be removed from day to day conversation: "We have tried that before," "It doesn't make sense to me," "The reason that won't work is," or "It is not our style or image."

## 2. *Reward new ideas.*

It may seem intuitive to do this, but it is more abnormal than normal. Leaders should find ways to make this happen.

## 3. *Encourage risk and allow for failure.*

Many innovators know that their best products came after many failures. Failure allows the group to know what they can do and what they cannot do. Knowing the 'bounds' of success allows the potential of innovation and the development process to speed up. Because of the world-wide economy and ultra-conservative approaches, many employees feel they cannot take risks because they are being paid to maintain the business.

## 4. *Allow for variation of approaches.*

Many companies want groups to develop concepts rather than individuals. However, it is my

experience that some of the most innovative people need time to 'think' and it is best done outside of the group.

## 5. *Limit the number of meetings.*

At one time in my career, I had over 35 meetings a week. Meetings are good for quick communication and sometimes for team building, but in most situations, meetings bring people together away from pressing, more-important issues. Meetings with more than five people should be limited. If you watch meetings that have 10, 15, 25 people, you will find many people sitting and not engaging. Meetings should focus on action, decisions and issues. They should have agendas, goals and time limits.

## Building an innovation process

Beyond setting the mood of the organisation, it is equally important to build a process of innovation. This starts with the process of capturing ideas or opportunities. These ideas must be carefully reviewed with an open attitude but focusing on the reward to the business and the ability to build a brand or product that has future expansion or protection. Once an idea is agreed upon, a process should be initiated to support it from development to commercialisation. This process should not be confining, but should include a discussion on resources, communication, timelines, goals, et cetera.



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It should fully discuss the flexibilities and the must-haves of the project. It becomes a tool rather than a box to control the organisation with. Some are project-vultures – always wanting updates. If a project is well discussed in the beginning, everyone should know the ongoing status. People should have clear, understandable goals allowing them to have some flexibility and fun.

## Building a vision and resources

Without a good vision, there is confusion. Without the right skill-sets, there is the potential of uneasiness because the project is missing key resources. Without good productive stimulation, organisation experience resistance in speed. Without the right equipment, the project experience frustration of not being able to get it done. Without a good day-to-day plan, the project seems to be going around in circles.

I believe the pet industry has more product innovation coming and more opportunities to innovate than any time in my career. With the growing quality changes, humanisation, ingredient focus, nutritional discoveries and packaging types – the next five years could bring a number of rapidly growing pet focused companies to those that are prepared to innovate. ■