

By Jeff “Chief” Urbaniak
COLUMNIST (www.AdviceChief.com)

Innovations are important. Without them, individuals, organizations, and nations don’t advance themselves. So why are they so difficult, at times, to get approved or adopted?

I once had the in-enviable task of having to convince someone of an innovation that would have made obsolete the very system he had worked on and perfected for 10 years. Of course he had no interest in the innovation. To convince him, I had to make him part of the innovation’s inception and evolutionary process. In time, he began supporting and championing the innovation.

In almost any situation involving innovation, people are asked to have faith in something unknown over something already known to be safe or pleasant. This is hard because it doesn’t make sense for the potential adopter to willingly risk the pleasant known for the unproven unknown.

Innovators often hear the following excuses after pitching a new idea:

- 1) This will never work.
- 2) No one will want this.
- 3) It can’t work in practice.
- 4) People won’t understand it.
- 5) This isn’t a problem.
- 6) This is a problem, but no one cares.
- 7) This is a problem and people care, but it’s already solved.
- 8) This is a problem and people care, but it will never make money.
- 9) This is a solution in search of a problem.
- 10) Get out of here now!

No matter how amazing an idea is, until proven otherwise, its imagined benefits will pale in comparison to the real and non-imagined fear of change.

In *Diffusion of Innovations*, Everett M. Rogers writes: “Many technologists think that advantageous innovations will sell themselves, that the obvious

benefits of a new idea will be widely realized by potential adopters, and that the innovation will therefore diffuse rapidly. Unfortunately, this is very seldom the case. Most innovations in fact diffuse at a surprisingly slow rate.”

The book takes an anthropological approach to innovation, suggesting that new ideas spread at speeds determined by psychology, sociology, and economics, not the abstract merits of those new ideas. For instance, as people and companies age, they have more to lose. They’re not willing to spend years chasing dreams or to endanger what they’ve worked so hard to build. Attitudes focused on security, risk aversion, and optimization of the status quo eventually become dominant positions, and may even become organizational policy at companies that were once young, nimble, and innovative. Their successes enabled them to grow into mainstream businesses, diminishing their interest and capacity for new ideas.

So, with so many sticking points involving innovation, how can you get an innovation adopted? Here are five factors that define how quickly innovations spread:

1) *Relative advantage.* What value does the new thing have compared to the old? Is there a perceived or real advantage? Make sure this advantage is determined by the potential consumer and not its makers. Perceived advantage is built on factors that include economics, prestige, convenience, fashion, and satisfaction.

2) *Compatibility.* How much effort is required to transition from the current thing to the innovation? If this cost is greater than the relative advantage, most people won’t try the innovation. These costs include people’s value systems, finances, habits, or personal beliefs. Years ago a Peruvian village rejected the innovation of boiling water because of cultural beliefs that hot foods were only for sick people. You could argue all you

wanted about the great benefits of boiling water, but if a religious or cultural belief forbids it, you’re wasting your breath. Technological compatibility is only part of what makes an innovation spread: the innovation has to be compatible with habits, beliefs, values, and lifestyles.

3) *Complexity.* How much learning is required to apply the innovation? Imagine if a box of free, high-quality, infinite battery-life cell phones (and matching solar-powered cell towers) mysteriously appeared in 9th-century England. Would people have started using them? No. That innovation would have required a jump in complexity that would have terrified most people. Therefore, the smaller the perceived conceptual gap, the higher the rate of acceptance.

4) *Trialability.* How easy is it to try the innovation? Teabags were first used as giveaways so people could sample tea without buying large tins, radically improving the trialability of brewed tea. Samples, giveaways, and demonstrations are centuries-old techniques for making it risk-free to try new ideas. This is why most clothing stores let you try on clothes and auto dealerships let you test-drive cars. The easier it is to try, the faster innovations diffuse.

5) *Observability.* How visible are the results of the innovation? The more visible the perceived advantage, the faster the rate of adoption, especially within social groups. Fashion fads are a great example of highly observable innovations. If something can be seen versus imagined, it’s a distinctive advantage over things imagined and not seen.

So the next time you are trying to advance an innovation for adoption, consider applying some or all five of these factors. Your chances of experiencing a successful breakthrough will increase dramatically.

~ The End ~