

Far-Fetched Ideas Are Fun. But Innovation Usually Starts Small

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DESPITE WHAT *NEW YORK TIMES* EDITORS MIGHT THINK, INNOVATIONS AREN'T ALWAYS WAY-OUT-THERE IDEAS. RATHER, THEY CAN BE SMALL, INCREMENTAL CHANGES THAT BETTER PEOPLE'S LIVES.

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A few weeks ago, *The New York Times Magazine* gave us "[32 Innovations That Will Change Your Tomorrow](#)." I'll admit that as I read about many of the ideas, I couldn't help but think, "Wow. This is cool." Having a phone that recognizes me by my personal gestures? Cool. Food packaging made out of food? Cool. Fabric that can boost battery life? Cool.

But innovation is about more than cool. Many of the ideas presented in the feature seem to ignore key elements of human behavior, motivation, and desire. Moreover, the coverage glamorizes innovation and presents it predominantly as those far-out-there ideas, while missing that sometimes innovations with the most impact are the smallest, most obvious ideas. Innovation is about solving people's problems in a way that's meaningful to them in the context of their lives. It's about finding ways to design services, products, and experiences that help people achieve their goals. It's about making life better for people, on people's terms, however they define what "better" means.

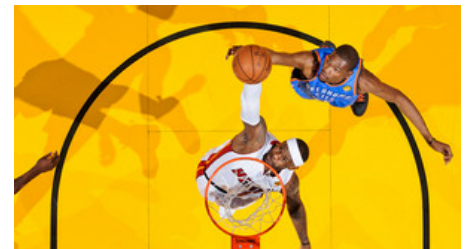
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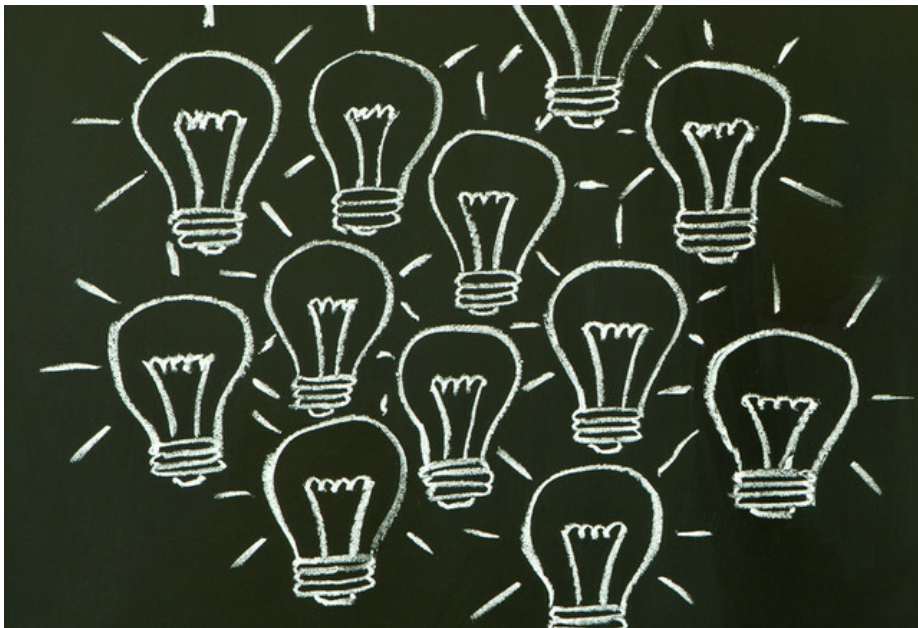
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TWO THOUSAND AND TWELVE

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Take, for example, Idea #23: The tooth sensor. This idea, which is being developed by scientists at Princeton and Tufts, is a small sensor placed on the tooth that can detect bacteria associated with plaque buildup, cavities, or infection and notify your dentist of problems. The sensors will be inexpensive enough that they can be replaced daily.

In theory, it's a great innovation--it could improve people's health through prevention and early detection while lowering both personal and national health care costs. But the idea doesn't account for how people really behave, or what *really* matters to people. Ask any dentist, and they will tell you that they have enough trouble getting even the most health-conscious person to floss regularly, let alone replace a tooth sensor daily. What matters most to people is getting in and out of the bathroom as fast as possible. The tooth sensor also assumes that people will effectively volunteer to tattle on themselves: "PLAQUE ALERT! ATTENTION, DR. SMITH! Daniel has been eating candy!" While it may seem really cool, it doesn't account for the context of how it needs to fit into people's lives.

So beyond the Cool Factor, what else should we keep in mind when we develop innovative ideas? Here are some of our thoughts:

1. POWERFUL IDEAS CAN BE AS SMALL AS A SACK OF BEANS

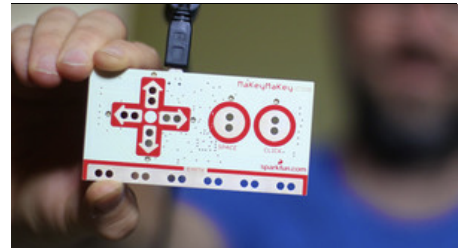
When we're faced with a major problem, we often expect that we need a huge solution to solve it. But innovation doesn't have to be some big new technology. A solution to a problem as large as global health, for example, may be as small as a sack of lentils. Esther Duflo, of the MIT Poverty Action Lab, has found that incenting Indian families with a kilo of lentils for immunizing their children significantly raises vaccination rates. Duflo's idea is so effective because it's based on an understanding of what's meaningful to the families involved, on their terms. A bag of lentils may seem like a small idea, but it resulted in real, measurable impact.

2. GOOD INNOVATIONS MEET CONSUMERS ON THEIR TERMS

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It's the late '90s, and the diaper wars are on. Huggies and Pampers are caught up in full-fledged battle, trying to come out with the World's Best Diaper. At the time, both companies thought that "best" translated to "most absorbent," and they designed their diapers accordingly. But in doing so, they lost sight of what moms cared about: being good moms. Diapers became so thick that wet and soiled diapers could sometimes go undetected for hours.

Continuum partnered with Pampers and helped them redesign their diapers in ways that not only addressed key functional concerns--such as absorbency--but also aligned with what mattered most to moms: supporting the developmental growth of their babies. Something as simple as putting an Elmo graphic on the seat, so moms could easily know which side was front and back, a wetness indicator, and tabs on the front to line up the tape made it easier for moms to change the baby, especially in the middle of the night. We also rebranded the diapers as Pampers Stages to speak directly to moms' desires to support their babies' growth, from Swaddlers to Cruisers. Other diapers branded by age; we focused on developmental stages. These small changes made moms feel confident and reassured that they were effectively aiding their babies' development and shot Pampers to the number-one spot on the market.

3. START WITH YOUR VISION, THEN WORK BACK TO TODAY

There is value in thinking about pie-in-the-sky, seemingly unattainable ideas. But it's a matter of how you use those ideas. Often, companies are looking for the strategic ideal to work toward but need some quick wins for right now. And even small changes can have major operational implications that take years to execute. So when we innovate, we first come up with that "lighthouse"--that ideal, almost unattainable experience that we ultimately want to deliver. And then we backcast. We ask ourselves: What are the steps that we can take today that will make an impact while moving the needle on the path toward our ideal? By using this backcasting model, we are able to ensure that each stage of innovation--no matter how incremental--can deliver something that makes an impact for people in the near, mid, and future terms. We always strive to arrive at our ideal, but often we've just gotta get there one step at a time.



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FROM THE EDITOR

Thanks for stopping by Fast Company's Co.Design. If you've been a reader for some time, you'll notice that we've just unveiled a brand-new redesign. YOU CAN READ ABOUT THE THOUGHT PROCESS BEHIND IT HERE. Our content, of course, will be the same: Our focus is on highlighting the world's best examples of design and innovation, working in concert. We started this site with a few simple premises in mind. First, design is a window onto the world at large, and the culture we live in. CONTINUED >

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GIANFRANCO ZACCAI

Today 09:54 AM

Thank you Daniel; a very thoughtful response to the usual "big lightbulb in the sky" as innovation article.

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