

Innovations We Love

Technology that gets people excited is the one that gets used

Innovation is not what is invented, it is what is adopted and used. When we, as IT professionals, invest the resources of our firms to innovate in ways that influence the bottom line, it is important to keep this in mind. There are many reasons for the success or failure of corporate IT projects. I think CIOs have a better chance of success if they begin to think of people as consumers with options, rather than employees with none. In that regard, there's a lot to be learned from two consumer products companies: Apple and Google.

When Apple introduced the iPod in 2001, many people rolled their eyes. Here came Apple late to the race again, entering an already crowded field of similar devices. It must indeed have been a satisfying moment for Apple when it announced the sale of the 100 millionth iPod in April this year.

Why was the iPod so widely adopted? The sleek design, the user-friendly interface, its ability to work with both Mac and PC, and a terrific marketing campaign certainly didn't hurt. But ask most any iPod user why he bought one and, though the expressions may vary, they all boil down to love. People love their iPods. They are fun, friendly, and easy to use. They have a style all their own, and by owning one people feel a connection to the world of other owners. "What's on your iPod?" became a catch phrase.

Apple didn't invent the digital audio player. What it did do brilliantly is invent a consumer device that was loveable.

It didn't take long for businesses to catch on to the important uses it could make of those millions of listening ears. And soon, millions of podcasts that users could tune in to started becoming available, covering everything from corporate earnings announcements to complete courses in search engine marketing. People loved the technology so much that they found even more ways to innovate around it, turning a music-playing device into a business information medium.

Apple took the next logical step last June, with the launch of the iPhone. It merged a digital audio player with a mobile phone that could also do email and surf the web. While not exactly innovative, it was the way they executed on the device's look and feel—with the beautiful, large glass screen and

fully functional web browser—that had consumers lining up around the block waiting to pay for one. Within hours after its arrival in stores, hundreds of developers were writing applications that could be downloaded and installed by users via the iPhone web browser. Not surprisingly, two of the most popular applications are an expense tracker, and a reader for Word docs, Excel spreadsheets, and PDFs. So once again, a consumer device is being used as a business productivity tool.

If only the rollout of a new ERP or business intelligence system could get employees so enraptured. Or could it?

I met Dave Girouard, the general manager of Google Enterprise, a while back. He showed a few screen shots of some typical corporate enterprise applications. Here was the payroll interface, the finance interface, the HR portal, etc. Though very different applications, they were all perfect cinderblocks. Identically gray and lifeless, and without the slightest hint of flair or whimsy, they almost seemed to be deliberately designed to reinforce the notion upon the users that their life was one of endless drudgery. No one loves cinderblocks.

Then Dave demonstrated another possibility. What if we could use the same Google interface everyone loves, to look up the same types of information? Type "3rd Quarter Sales" into the search bar, and the results simply appear. Of course he was selling a product, but he was also selling an idea.

The idea is that the technology people love is the one that gets used. And when people love a technology, they figure out all kinds of new and innovative ways to use it to be more productive and affect that all-important bottom line. ■



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