

Invention, Innovation, and Back to the Starting Line

by BROCK WEIR

It's often said that necessity is the mother of invention.

There is a lot of truth in that statement. However, maybe 'invention' just has a better public relations team behind it to push this idea.

It's more accurately the case, in my observation, that necessity doesn't always give birth to invention, but rather innovation.

We don't have to look very hard to find a few examples of weird and wonderful 'and, indeed, not-so-wonderful' brainstorming ideas that have given way to equally weird and wonderful ideas reinventing the proverbial wheel. More often than not, though, the most useful 'inventions' are innovations on something that already exists in a bid to make whatever it is sturdier, easier to use, streamlined, more user-friendly for people of various abilities, more automated than its predecessors, or even more equipped to pick up your household or workplace wifi signal 'although, at this moment, I'm unconvinced on why one would ever need a standing mixer that is wifi equipped, but maybe those who spend more time in the kitchen than I do can shed light on that particular conundrum.

This week I had the pleasure of interviewing a gentleman with a particularly practical innovation.

Having embarked on a cancer journey at a very young age, the resident, who thankfully now has a clean bill of health, used his lived experience and his academic know-how to take an already-existing product, the humble boxer-brief, in an entirely new and helpful direction 'specially engineered underwear to provide additional, near-tailored support for individuals who are living with or recovering from pelvic injuries ranging from orchiectomies to hernia procedures.

His is not a product created from whole cloth, if you pardon the pun. Instead, it's a clear improvement on a garment that has supported its wearers in one way or another since the early 1990s. Still, the new spin opens up the door to new users, customers, and the opportunity for partnership with companies that make cooling packs and other support products.

Yet not all innovations are created equal.

When I got to the office on Tuesday morning and washed my hands before settling into a full day of writing, somehow the soap in the bathroom, the label for which trumpeted the viscous liquid inside as '2x Ultra' without going into further details on just what exactly had been multiplied, ultra-fied, or turbo-ized didn't exactly impart the idea that the soap, cleanser and detergent market had been upended by apparently 'new and improved' super-sudzer.

As a kid, when staying up way past one's prescribed bedtime seemed like an exciting and daring prospect, it was game over once I got a small TV of my very own around my eighth or ninth Christmas. Once it was installed in my bedroom 'well, it seemed like the world was my oyster when I wanted to be particularly rebellious and stay awake until 1 or 2 in the morning just on principle.

Maybe I was weird, but try as I might, I'd often get sucked into infomercials while whiling away those hours 'again, on principle.

As much as all those 'set it and forget it' appliances introduced by Ron Popeil found their way onto my wish list for my ninth or tenth Christmas, I questioned other innovations and inventions that were also peppered in. I didn't, for instance, see the practical use in those odd little gizmos that would pierce one end of your egg and beat the whites and the yolks before you even needed to crack open the shell 'after all, cracking an egg and beating it with a fork isn't exactly labour intensive and has done the trick ever since the Renaissance made forks a go-to eating and cooking utensil.

But, then again, the 90s were prime time for unusual products and innovations. Who, for instance, asked for clear colas? Don't get

me wrong, for the brief period it was on the market, Crystal Pepsi was my go-to bevvy, but other than being the colour of Sprite or club soda, what else did it really have going for it? The same can be said of the also-clear drink, Orbitz, which, for some reason, had colourful globs of nothingness floating in it, apparently just for kicks ? but, unlike clear cola, I guess the argument could be made that Orbitz walked for a brief period of time so Boba could fly and crack the North American market, but that's not always the case!

As much as we innovate, there are also plenty of examples of everything old being new again.

Over the weekend, I couldn't help but chuckle when turned from an evening newscast just before bed, turned the channel, and settled in with a head-clearing game show on a channel dedicated to just that. Almost as soon as I landed on the network, I was greeted with a commercial for a ?party line? in which the GTA's apparently ?hottest? singles were congregating for a night of yakking. Not having seen a commercial such as that since the days when the Ronco Food Dehydrator was the hottest, driest new appliance on the market, I was astounded that in the age of dating apps and other venues that these phone lines have been rolling on under the radar.

Then again, you might be reading this and finding equal astonishment I haven't ?cut the cord? on my regular cable service ? let's be truthful with ourselves there, too. Another example of everything old being new again.

When streaming services such as Netflix first hit the market, what set them apart from other ?corded? services was they were cheaper, accessible from anywhere with an internet connection, and commercial free. Given their tremendous initial success, dozens of similar competitors came up, as did streaming services by big networks to recapture some of their market share.

But, as the market flood slowed, and people had to be more conscious about which subscriptions they could afford and handle, Netflix and its imitators began to limit where their content could be viewed, raised their prices, and reintroduced humble commercials to their fare ? unless you wanted to pay an ever-rising extra fee for the privilege of viewing what you subscribed for in the first place.

The cord grew back ? and is more innovative now than ever before!

In this role, it's always a pleasure to see how members of the community are stepping up with their ideas on how to innovate, whether for their community or the wider world. Some ideas might fizzle, some might go the distance, some might draw upon old ideas, or offer a new use for a venerable product ? and as much as the end result is important, so too is the journey.

Let's keep ?em coming!