

Strategic Imagination: external Thought Leaders inspire Breakthrough Innovation

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Innovation efforts often deliver disappointingly short-term ideas and fail to identify longer-term growth platforms. An organization's inwardly-focused and historically-biased view of the world limits its capacity for "strategic imagination". Bringing in fresh, future-oriented perspectives from outside the organization is an essential catalyst for innovative, "stretch thinking". External "Thought Leaders" from a variety of domains can be brought into the innovation process to help a team develop "Industry Foresight" – and to identify non-obvious opportunities. This brief paper describes how a non-traditional "Thought Leader Panel" approach inspires new levels of strategic thinking.

The limitations of an internally-focused world view

Companies often struggle to look beyond their own world view. Historically-biased data, inwardly-focused thinking, established mindsets, and outmoded innovation practices conspire to limit an organization's ability to envision new possibilities for growth. Innovation teams usually have no problem coming up with ideas, though the results of traditional "brainstorming sessions" are often disappointing – predominantly short-term ideas rooted in past and present thinking, that assume the battle must be joined under today's competitive rules. In many cases the ideas are repeats from similar sessions conducted in the past.

We can't expect teams to be imaginative and visionary if they have an inwardly-focused world view. Without fresh stimulus it's hard to think differently.

Organizations typically have no shortage of data (especially historical statistics and consumer research) but often lack real insights that inspire imaginative thinking. While company employees bring essential subject-matter expertise they are equally encumbered by long-held operating assumptions and orthodoxies of an internally-focused world view.

It is important, of course, to build the core business through "incremental" product iterations and line extensions. That said, forward-looking companies seek to balance this short-term, "today-centric" thinking with a more future-oriented approach that builds longer-term growth. In other words, they are seeking to innovate strategically.

"Getting out of the box" starts by looking over the sides

This higher ground cannot be attained by using the same approach. Forward-looking organizations have a curiosity and a thirst to engage with fresh perspectives from the outside. They actively seek ways to stretch their thinking and to move beyond their own set of inbuilt experiences, beliefs and "blind spots" and to explore new possibilities. When an organization looks beyond its own orthodoxies, technology capabilities, business boundaries and historical practices it dramatically raises its ability to identify platforms for breakthrough growth.

Inspirational, external thinkers and provocateurs are the essential catalyst for teams that seek breakthrough innovation and wish to look beyond the obvious answers. We refer to these external provocateurs as "Thought Leaders".

External Thought Leaders – inspirational provocateurs and visionaries – are the essential catalyst for teams that seek breakthrough innovation.



There are several ways to bring external thinkers into the mix, some more effective than others. These include: informal conversations with industry experts or conference speakers; establishing an ongoing Innovation Advisory Board; conducting “immersion visits” with industry-leading companies; and – most impactful of all – a “Thought Leader Panel”.

The Thought Leader Panel approach

InnovationPoint’s non-traditional Thought Leader Panel approach is an iterative process that may have several stated goals: to identify potential opportunities and growth platforms; to conceive of new ventures, business models or products and services; to address organizational knowledge gaps or “blind spots”; to identify emerging trends; to foster new business partnerships; to create momentum around a stalled initiative; or to build internal alignment that accelerates decision-making and facilitates implementation.

During the panel process a cross-functional team comprised of an organization’s subject-matter experts

and innovators is brought face-to-face with external industry Thought Leaders to explore, speculate and collaborate in a shirt-sleeves working environment.

InnovationPoint’s Thought Leader Panel approach

Definition:

- The focal point of an iterative innovation process is the “Thought Leader Panel” – a custom-designed, unconventional one-day innovation session with Thought Leaders, followed by a two-day synthesis and action planning session
- Thought Leaders are forward-looking provocateurs – experts in their respective fields: practitioners, executives, potential partners, industry analysts/observers, academics, venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, consultants and “cultural creatives”

Goals:

- To identify strategic opportunities, growth platforms and product/service concepts – by understanding emerging trends; consumer insights; best practices; convergence of technologies and markets; blurring business boundaries; and seeking “white spaces”
- To stimulate “stretch” thinking – and to envision entirely new possibilities
- To ensure that short-term actions are anchored to long-term vision
- To create shared understanding and alignment among key stakeholders – to accelerate prioritization/decision-making and facilitate cross-functional support for implementation

Format:

- Brings together six hand-picked visionaries – from inside and outside your industry
- Highly collaborative interactions between Thought Leaders and cross-functional innovation team
- Leverages (but goes beyond) factual information – combines with intuition, speculation and “possibility thinking”
- Illustrator captures ideas in real time – for use in consumer/ customer validation, and internal communications and evangelization

Sourced from many different walks of life these forward-looking Thought Leaders are experts in their respective fields. They are practitioners, executives, potential partners, industry analysts/observers, academics, venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, consultants or “cultural creatives”.

Strategic Innovation is a process – not an event

The Thought Leader Panel is the focal point of an iterative innovation process that includes several steps: scoping (defining the focus and desired outcomes), planning, panel definition (identifying a provocative set of “focal areas” that address the business issue or opportunity), Thought Leader recruiting and coaching, the panel itself, synthesis, opportunity prioritization and development, and implementation planning.

Conducted in parallel with these steps is a series of consumer/customer insight, strategic thinking and market immersion activities that enable the innovation team members (and other stakeholders) to

fully participate in the panel.

Combining visionary thinking with pragmatism, the Thought Leader Panel itself is a one-day innovation session followed immediately by a two-day synthesis and action planning session.

The one-day panel approach is significantly more effective than sequential, individual interactions with Thought Leaders because it exploits the interactions between them. Inspiration comes when the Thought Leaders vociferously debate different perspectives on the future, and when they identify connections and opportunities at the intersections of their respective worlds. Secondly, a variety of non-traditional in-session techniques enable Thought Leaders and the innovation team to move beyond static thinking and to take a future-oriented perspective that visualizes breakthrough possibilities.

Defining a Thought Leader Panel initiative

The panel approach can be used to address a wide array of business questions – from strategic to highly tactical. For example:

- What growth platforms and products should we focus on – and how should we execute against them?
- How should we define our go-to-market strategy?
- What “white space” opportunities lie at the intersections of our business and other industries?
- How can we improve our operating practices by learning from other industries?

The initiative’s sponsor and the innovation team play a key role in scoping the opportunity/ issue to be addressed, and in defining the external Thought Leader “focal areas”.

Industry Foresight: understanding emerging trends

While most companies use trends as part of their planning process the focus is often on the statistical analysis of historical, established trends. But hindsight is inadequate for future planning in an increasingly volatile and unpredictable world. It is essential to identify emerging trends – and to capitalize on them ahead of the competition.

By combining facts, intuition, speculation and “possibility thinking” an organization can develop “Industry Foresight” – an understanding of emerging marketplace drivers, non-obvious trends and possible dislocations. Through Industry Foresight an organization puts itself in a position to create a visionary and proprietary view of the future. This is the foundation for the development of pragmatic growth strategies to pursue potential “white spaces” and other untapped opportunities.

Organizations typically keep a relatively narrow set of trends on their radar screen – those directly and obviously related to their industry. But to innovate at a more strategic level an expansive view is required – one that looks at trends both inside and outside an organization’s normal field of view.

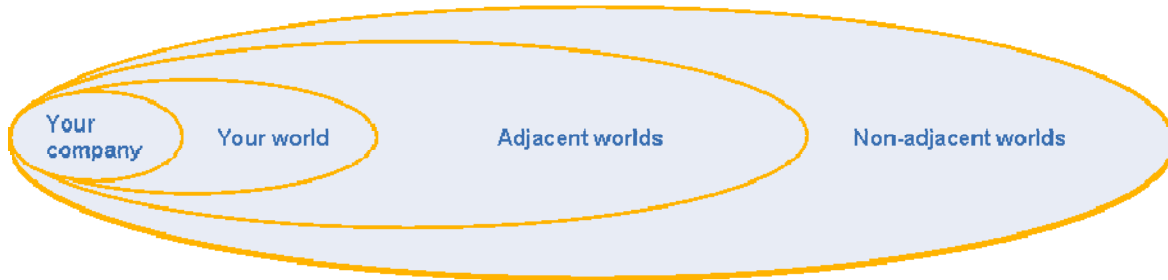
Strategic Innovation requires an organization to look at the intersections of emerging trends in many areas (social, demographic, technological, geographical, environmental, political, regulatory and competitive) – as well as others that may seem extraneous at first sight.

A visionary food and beverage company, for example, would look well beyond historical consumption data, gaps in its product lineup, or a snapshot of today’s competitive product landscape, and would also monitor the early growth stages of alternative distribution channels, emerging technologies that originate *outside* (but could impact) their world, or try to imagine the marketing communications possibilities driven by the proliferation of consumer electronics devices and the emergence of “social networks”.

Juxtaposition: looking at the intersections of adjacent (and non-adjacent) worlds

By juxtaposing our conventional frame of reference with other worlds beyond our immediate field of view it is possible to envision entirely new possibilities and opportunities for growth. The trick is to ask: How can we go well beyond our own internal expertise and drive our “strategic imagination” to new heights? “What can we learn from “adjacent or non-adjacent worlds” such as fashion, sports, entertainment, cosmetics or high tech? For example, what could we learn from Mattel about rapid new product innovation, from JetBlue about launching a new brand, or from Avon about communicating to women

consumers? What non-obvious opportunities can be revealed at the intersections of their worlds and ours?



A sample panel – food and beverage industry

There are many ways to design a Thought Leader panel. The following hand-picked panel demonstrates one possible configuration that could spark the “strategic imagination” of a food and beverage company seeking to explore strategic and product opportunities at the intersections of several areas, including: home entertainment, health & wellness, viral marketing, emerging work and leisure trends, and high-end packaging.

Combining the Thought Leader Panel approach with other methodologies

The Thought Leader Panel approach is extremely effective in combination with other methodologies. One key input, for example, is a relevant set of Consumer/Customer Insights using non-traditional approaches. Equally, conducting an “idea competition” or a web-based survey among key stakeholders or a larger set of employees can provide a useful benchmark of the organization’s current thinking prior to working with external perspectives.



About InnovationPoint

InnovationPoint is a non-traditional consulting firm that helps its Fortune 1000 clients take a strategic approach to innovation. InnovationPoint blends non-traditional and conventional methodologies to identify breakthrough opportunities, develop growth strategies and consumer-inspired new products, and helps clients develop repeatable methodologies, organizational structures and create cultures that drive innovation. InnovationPoint’s clients include Visa, Disney, Kimberly-Clark, PepsiCo, Frito-Lay, Philips, and Charles Schwab.