

Make things simple!

In early May, I attended a panel discussion at Princeton University on- Innovation & Entrepreneurship. What I found is that much of today's innovation involves making things easier to use. In that spirit I will make this newsletter as concise as possible for you, the busy reader.

Paul English, CTO/co-founder of Kayak.com, the world's largest travel search site, opened with a great statement: "It's simple to make things complicated for our customers, but complicated to make things simple". His vision is to engage customers in designing his software. So he requires every employee to talk, email or twitter with customers every day. He doesn't do this by merely asking his employees to cooperate. Instead, he directs phone calls and emails to employees' desks for immediate resolution. English acknowledged this is sometimes disrupting but the employees get a real sense of what customers are experiencing.

Avner Ronen, CEO & Co-founder of Boxee.tv, a company that makes it easy to sort and play videos from the web, had a similar message. Boxee's service using existing technology, is considered evolutionary not revolutionary, and is disrupting a huge industry because their service is so user friendly. One technique Ronen described is the creation of an on-line forum to get real-time customer input on web based videos. He believes this process will enable his company to constantly improve the product for the customer, thereby increasing customer enjoyment.

A third speaker, Larry Bohn, Managing Director of General Catalyst Partners, told the audience his company invests in both new and existing technology businesses. A prime criteria before purchase- the product or service must be easy to understand. General Catalyst believes that overall success will be limited if business models or products are too complicated.

Even though the discussion was titled "Innovation and Entrepreneurship" and the speakers gave examples of the innovative products they developed in an entrepreneurial manner, the common message was the need to make things easier for customers. The panelists all shared their own business processes and how they simplify them.

In our businesses, how do we make it easier for people to deal with us and our products? Here are some suggestions:

- Go on your own website, navigate through it, and see what customers experience.
- Map current process customers use to investigate, communicate and buy.
- Eliminate non-value added activities in all customer processes. All content and activities should directly fulfill a customer need and provide greater value than the required investment.
- Decide what our core competency is and outsource the rest to someone with that expertise.

Unnecessary complexity impedes growth because customers will ultimately find someone who does it better. The most innovative companies have an active process of listening to customers and changing accordingly.

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