Open Innovation & Co-Development

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I think there is some confusion about Open Innovation and Co-Development. Just two short weeks after attending CoDev 2012, the annual CoDevelopment and Open Innovation Summit in La Jolla CA, I review my notes and say…huh? And I don't think that I am the only one who's confused. The term "Open Innovation" (OI) appears to be the new "innovation."

What do I mean by this? First, there isn't a standard definition of the concept that anyone can agree upon, and yet everyone says they're doing it. (It's like those companies that use innovation in their logo as a key talking point but don't do any innovation… you know who you are.) And second, no one seems to know how to successfully measure "it."

At the conference, I participated in a roundtable discussion on the Open Innovation movement. Some of my group defined Open Innovation as crowd sourcing, while others viewed it as the use of any external resources in the innovation process. In almost every case, I got the feeling that the people who had been put into the Open Innovation arena were there reluctantly. They know it's important and there is a need for such tools, but without real guidance or management buy-in, they don't pursue OI in the same aggressive and proactive manner they might when dealing with internal efforts.

On Day One of the conference, we heard from Owen Carryl, Vice President of external innovation at Avery Dennison. Carryl presented Avery Dennison's 10 steps to quickly building OI capability. The steps included things like set: clear up-front expectations, determine business needs, and find external solutions. Perhaps the most important takeaway though, was the need to embed an Open Innovation culture in your organization if you truly want to embrace OI in the long term. This means having the ability to be open with your external partner, trust in your team, reward everyone that helps drive the process forward, and be flexible with IP ownership.

Carryl then challenged every person in his audience to find a way to work with Avery Dennison. Not in a sales sense, but by embracing the idea of cross pollination of industries and resources, and increasing the serendipity of creating breakthrough new products by being open to any ideas and external resources, no matter how unrelated they may seem.

It seems to me that being open minded, and trusting decision makers to create and inspire their team, is one of the most important things a company can do. Choose a leader who is willing to look deeper and explore different paths and opportunities, because after all, you never really know what you might discover along the way. Things that look as though they would never go together might actually be the foundation for your most ground breaking technology integration ever.

Day Two of the conference brought a wonderful panel discussion from three partners at Duane Morris, LLP, a legal powerhouse in the field of Intellectual Property (IP), trademarks, copyrights and everything in between. The Morris team offered tips for sorting through the IP mess, but it was refreshing to hear that IP is actually a thorn in EVERYONE's side. From large corporations to SME's and universities, IP is a sticky issue, and it's getting increasingly complicated as more people and entities get involved. Sorry to say, but there were no easy answers on that topic.

The best part of the summit though, was the roundtable sessions that provided a forum for attendees to discuss things they were having trouble with, or better yet, talk about their successes. If more conferences were structured in this manner, we might actually solve some of the world's greatest challenges. Don't get me wrong, I love a good case study, but there is something powerful about networking with peers, lamenting about similar problems, and discussing strategies to overcome them.

After all, isn't that what the concept of Open Innovation is all about; sharing problems and exploring solutions together? However you define it, Open Innovation is going on all over the globe, as companies look outside of themselves to learn new things, explore opportunities, and find solutions to some of their biggest problems.

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