



## EVERY INNOVATION NEEDS A STORY

### HOW ENTREPRENEURS CAN CONVINCe OTHERS TO BUY IN TO THEIR IDEAS

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At its heart, innovation is a profoundly social phenomenon. More often than not, it is the story that makes the innovation, rather than the other way around. Want to be successful at innovation? You need to convince others to buy into your idea. If you are an aspiring innovator, or a project leader, you need to be able to tell your story in a manner that captures the imagination of investors or business unit leaders. If you are an investor, or business unit leader, you need to know what to listen for in an innovation narrative.

Thomas Edison was able to capture the imagination of several different stakeholder communities with his inspirational comment that: "We will make electricity so cheap that only the rich will burn candles." But he was also equally precise about looking to invent a light that was affordable, efficient, and non-flickering as well, in order to suggest that economy and adoptability would lead to the desired market outcome. In other words, this was not idle speculation, but a well thought-out commercial endeavor. Similarly, the image of a systematic innovation system that he conjured up with the term "invention factory," coupled with the practical formulation of innovation practices such as experimentation, an open-office layout for faster conversations and a team-based approach in the pursuit of such precise targets as "a minor invention every ten days and a big thing every six months or so," provided both the dream of bold aspiration and the reassurance of a detailed means of achieving such aspiration. Contrast this with the impossible [Better Place dreams of Shai Agassi](#), or perhaps the yet unfulfilled dreams of Elon Musk for the colonization of Mars as "[a fixer-upper of a planet](#)." Both were, or are, certainly boldly aspirational, but both lack the specificity of a story to provide the necessary confidence that they are achievable.

Why is this so hard for innovators to learn? I have been working with innovators from a wide range of industries in Europe, the U.S, and Asia (especially China). They are desperately in love with their ideas and the technologies that these ideas entail, not necessarily in that order, but all too often there is no story to go along with the glitter of the idea, and their chances for success are diminished by this omission. If you doubt this, listen to serial entrepreneur, business school professor and bestselling author Scott Galloway who unequivocally attributes Amazon's success to its [core-competency of "storytelling."](#)

My experience is that it is easier than most think, and that you can tell your innovation story in three parts: Why? What? How? I also think that there are easy tools for each part that make the story vivid.

## **Why?**

In order to rally the troops around your idea, there needs to be a shared awareness and agreement that doing something different is a good idea. Otherwise, we all find inertia to be a powerful force opposing innovation. Since I believe that all innovation should ultimately be about improving the customer experience, establishing some sense of what constitutes a winning customer experience today, and where it is likely to be tomorrow is a good way to begin. Interpreting S-curves as a representation of customer experience, rather than technologies, makes this more visual and gives your story some sense of how imminent disruptive change is likely to be.

## **What?**

Once an improved customer experience is accepted as the goal of innovation, then the business model is the natural representation of the next part of our story: the What?. For me,

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nothing is as useful in this regard as the [Business Model Canvas](#), which broadens our field of vision as to what might be a useful innovative direction and allows us to prototype non-technical innovation as well. What the Business Model Canvas provides is a detailed scope of “what” a possible innovation requires in how we bring it to market; what are the value propositions that we are offering, to whom, and what do we have to do to support this innovative idea? Since the inclusion of revenues and expenses are explicitly welcome on the canvas, we also have a way to demonstrate the financial viability of an idea as well.

## How?

Repeat after me: it makes no sense at all to consider a changing business environment (why?), and a different way of going to market (our innovation; what?), without acknowledging that we may have to change the way we work as well. Once you pitch the “what”, the evaluative portion of your audience will immediately be thinking “how are we going to make this work?” [Jay Galbraith’s star model](#) is a useful way of considering and portraying the organizational culture changes that might have to take place in order to support our new business model? And, what are the managerial choices associated with obtaining those changes?

There are three simple steps to building a better innovation story, and stories matter. As former CLO of WIPRO [Abhijit Bhaduri puts it](#), “The story finds mind space amidst the clutter of data and information” and then he adds several points that are important for making your story a compelling one:

“A story has to be something that is unexpected. What is predictable is never material for a story.” (this is often about the “why?”)

“Stories are all about discovering the mundane in the exotic and the unusual when all of it is predictable.” (this is typically about the “what?”)

“Storytelling must be about the audience. Stories have to leave some role for the audience. They persuade the audience to suspend their disbelief.” They also speak to the audience’s principle concerns or hopes. (this often speaks directly to the “how?”)

This is not about adding yet another requirement on the entrepreneur; rather, it’s about taking the time to raise the probability of success for a new idea. Innovation can never just be about the technology. It must have an empathetic view of the audience and it must speak to their needs. Edison realized the importance of storytelling in the innovation process, when he indicated by the observation ["Inventors must be poets so that they may have imagination."](#) Let us all be poets in our roles as innovators.

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