

Strategic Imagination: Using External Thought Leaders to Inspire Breakthrough Innovation

Identifying “beyond-the-box” opportunities through Strategic Foresight

Soren Kaplan
Managing Principal, InnovationPoint LLC

Abstract

Growth strategy efforts often deliver disappointingly short-term ideas and fail to identify longer-term opportunities. An organization's inwardly-focused and historically-biased view of the world limits its capacity for "strategic imagination." But 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 "Strategic Foresight" – and to identify non-obvious opportunities. This brief paper describes how a non-traditional "Thought Leader" approach inspires new levels of strategic thinking.

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.

The limitations of an internally-focused world view

Companies often struggle to see 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 – 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 same people are generating the same pet ideas and there's little fresh thinking.

Organizations usually have no shortage of data (especially historical statistics and consumer research), but what they often lack is real insights that spark the imagination. While company employees bring essential subject-matter expertise, the downside is that they are encumbered by long-held operating assumptions and orthodoxies of an internally-biased world view.

Of course, it is necessary to continue building the core business and to "make the numbers", through "incremental" product iterations and line extensions. That said, forward-looking companies intentionally balance this short-term focus with a future orientation that seeks out bigger opportunities that will drive mid- and longer-term growth. In other words, they recognize the critical need to innovate strategically.

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

'Getting out of the box' is a very tired and overused expression, but the fact is: new thinking and breakthrough growth don't happen if the same employees look at the same data and have the same discussions every day. Forward-looking organizations have a fierce curiosity and a thirst to engage with fresh perspectives from the outside. They actively seek ways to stretch beyond their inbuilt set of experiences, orthodoxies, historical practices, "blind spots", technology capabilities, and business boundaries. They understand that looking at the world differently is the only way to dramatically increase their ability to identify truly new opportunities that will drive breakthrough growth.

So, how can we infuse fresh thinking? Who do we bring in to the mix? Inspirational, external thinkers and provocateurs are an essential catalyst for teams that seek

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

breakthrough innovation and that want to push themselves to look beyond the obvious answers. In one of our core methodologies we refer to them as “Thought Leaders.”

There are several ways to involve them. These include: formal or informal, one-on-one conversations with industry or technology experts; creating “open innovation” networks; establishing an ongoing Innovation Advisory Board; conducting “immersion visits” with industry-leading companies; and bringing them together in a specialized forum to address specific business or technology challenges. This latter approach is discussed here.

The Thought Leader approach

InnovationPoint’s non-traditional Thought Leader approach is an iterative process that may have several stated goals, such as: 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 process a cross-functional team comprised of an organization’s own 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.

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

It’s a process – not an event

The Thought Leader Session is the “main event” of an iterative, divergent-to-convergent innovation process that includes several steps: scoping (defining the focus and desired outcomes), planning, session definition (identifying a provocative set of “focal areas” that address the business issue/need), Thought Leader recruiting, selection and coaching, the session itself, opportunity prioritization and development, roadmapping, 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 (and other stakeholders) to fully participate in the session itself.

Combining visionary thinking with pragmatism, the Thought Leader Session itself is a one-day, carefully orchestrated

InnovationPoint’s Thought Leader approach

Definition

- The focal point of this iterative innovation process is the “Thought Leader Session” – a custom-designed, unconventional one-day meeting with external experts, followed by a one-day synthesis and action planning session
- Thought Leaders are forward-looking provocateurs – experts in their respective fields: specialist 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

- Bring together hand-picked visionaries – from inside and outside your industry
- Highly collaborative interactions between Thought Leaders and cross-functional innovation team
- Leverage (but goes beyond) factual information – combine with intuition, speculation and “possibility thinking”

meeting. The session involves the Thought Leaders and key stakeholders from the company. Bringing them all together at once is significantly more effective than sequential, one-on-one interactions with because it exploits the interactions between all participants, and delivers new insights and a common experience for the company stakeholders. Inspiration comes when the Thought Leaders vociferously debate their different views on the future, and when they identify connections and opportunities at the intersections of their respective worlds. The session consists of a fast-paced series of non-traditional interactions that enable Thought Leaders and the innovation team to quickly move beyond static thinking and to take a future-oriented perspective that identifies breakthrough possibilities.

Defining a Thought Leader initiative

The approach can be used to address a wide array of challenges – from technology- to business-focused, and from strategic to tactical. For example:

- What emerging trends will shape our world – and how can we leverage them?
- What growth platforms and products should we focus on – and how should we execute against them?
- What “white space” opportunities lie at the intersections of our business and other industries?
- How can we ensure our R&D investments are aligned with consumers’ emerging priorities?
- How should we define our-go-to-market strategy?

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”.

Strategic Foresight: understanding emerging trends

While most companies use trends as part of their planning process the focus is often on the analysis of historical, established trends. But hindsight is woefully 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, right-brained intuition, speculation and “possibility thinking” an organization can develop “Strategic Foresight” – an understanding of emerging marketplace drivers, non-obvious trends and possible dislocations. With Strategic Foresight an organization puts itself in a position to create a visionary and proprietary view of the future, and to ask: “What does this mean for us?” This underlies the development of pragmatic growth strategies to pursue potential “white spaces” and other untapped opportunities.

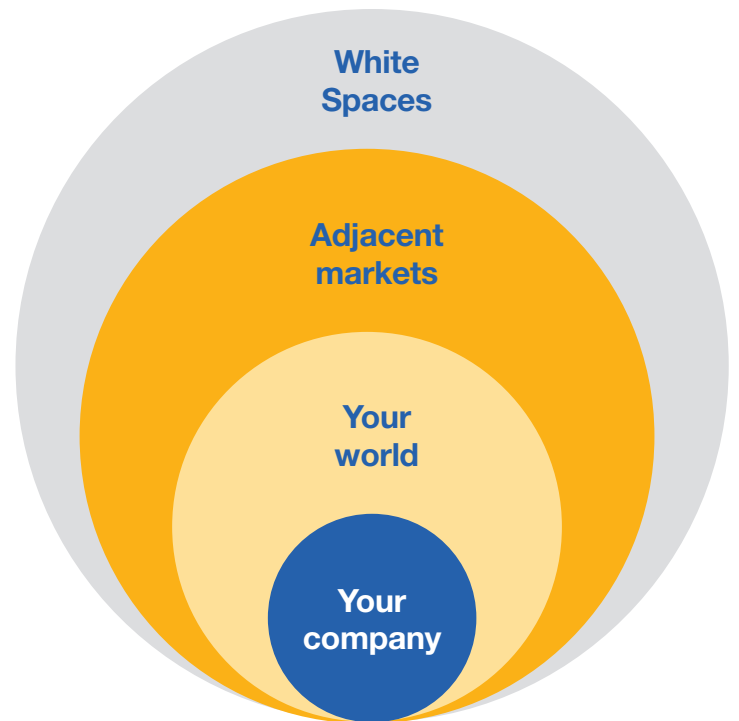
Organizations typically keep a relatively narrow set of trends on their radar screen – those directly and obviously related to their industry. But to innovate at a more imaginative and strategic level a more expansive view is required – one that also looks at trends that lie outside an organization’s 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 might 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, novel business models, emerging technologies that originate outside (but could potentially impact) their world, or try to imagine the marketing communications possibilities driven by the proliferation of consumer electronics and the emergence of social networks.

Juxtaposition: stretching our thinking 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. This approach of seeking “breakthroughs at the intersections” is described in Frans Johansson’s book “The Medici Effect”. 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 and apply from “adjacent or non-adjacent worlds” such as fashion, sports, entertainment, cosmetics or high tech? For example, what could we learn about interface design from Apple; about rapid new product innovation from Mattel; about launching new brands from Virgin; or about communicating to women consumers from Avon? What non-obvious opportunities can be revealed at the intersections of their worlds and ours?



Designing a session

There are a great many ways to design a Thought Leader Innovation Session. The following design demonstrates one possible configuration that could spark the “strategic imagination” of a food and beverage company seeking to explore new strategic and product opportunities at the intersections of several areas, such as: home entertainment, health & wellness, social media marketing, emerging work and leisure trends, next-generation food technologies, and high-end packaging.

Synthesis and Roadmapping

Immediately after a Thought Leader Session, structured debriefs engage the innovation team in identifying key insights, and drawing strategic and tactical implications. A shared vision, strategy and Implementation Roadmap are then developed that describe the path for moving forward, including activity tracks, milestones, roles/responsibilities, high-level resource allocation, customer/consumer testing, opportunity refinement, and go-to-market activities.



About InnovationPoint

InnovationPoint is a boutique innovation consulting firm focused on the practice of Strategic Innovation. We blend non-traditional and conventional consulting methodologies to deliver business breakthroughs that grow the topline – through opportunity identification, new business creation, strategy development and new product, service and category innovation. Our clients include Visa, Disney, Cisco, NBCUniversal, Colgate-Palmolive, Ascension Health, Hershey's, Red Bull, Frito-Lay, PepsiCo, Philips, Medtronic and other market leaders.