

1990-2010

## Vincent & Associates Begins 20th Year in Business

By Lanny Vincent

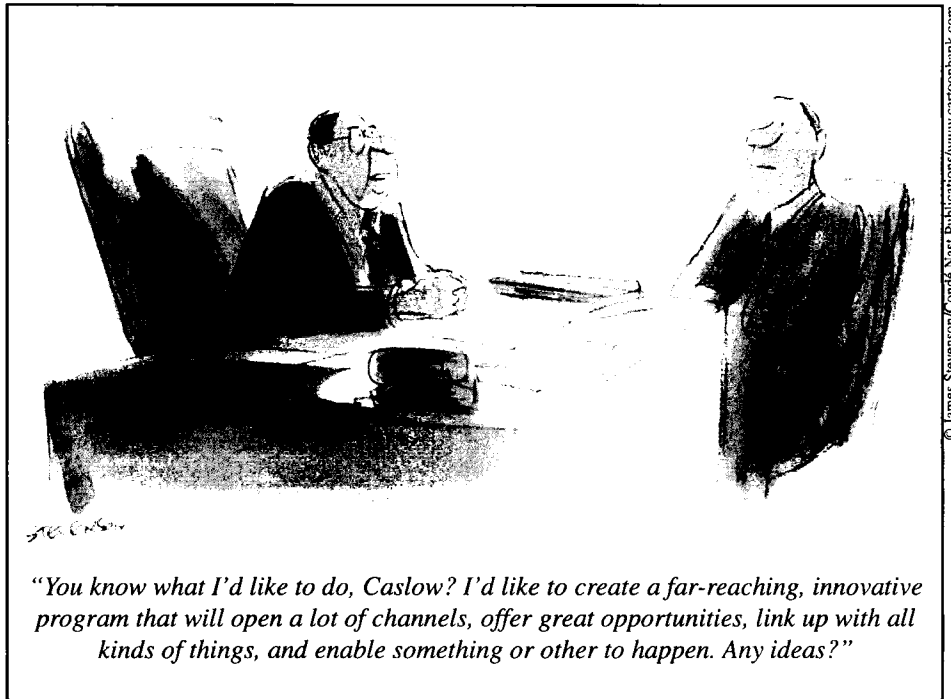
For the past 20 years, we have facilitated hundreds of collaborative invention workshops and dozens of opportunity foresight cycles and market discovery efforts for companies in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia in a variety of industry sectors. Increasingly we are being invited to coach innovators and their executive sponsors. And lately, we are being asked to provide subject matter expertise where the topic is innovating in the context of successful companies.

We count the results of our work in the relationships we have with our clients, some of which stretch even beyond our 20 years in business. As in previous years, 80% of our business comes from clients with whom we have worked for over five years.

In all these engagements we have especially enjoyed our close and ongoing associations with so many innovation practitioners, who we see as fellow students of innovation learning what the crucibles of innovating can teach us. These associations have led not only to the publication of the book, *The Maverick Way: Profiting from the Power of the Corporate Misfit* in 2000, and the article *Innovation Midwives* in *Research-Technology Management* in January 2005, but also built a robust body of knowledge on how to manage and parent innovations in corporations. We now find ourselves disseminating this know-how to groups of senior technologists in our client companies who are well positioned to have a catalyzing effect on others within their organizations.

Over the past five years we have witnessed a flood of books and articles on innovation and innovation management, not to mention

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*"You know what I'd like to do, Caslow? I'd like to create a far-reaching, innovative program that will open a lot of channels, offer great opportunities, link up with all kinds of things, and enable something or other to happen. Any ideas?"*

## Looking Back and Looking Forward

By Jane Gannon

Each January first, we feel like Janus, the mythological god of beginnings and endings. Janus was often used to symbolize change and transitions such as the progression of past to future, of one condition to another, of one vision to another, the growing up of young people, and of one universe to another. Janus was known as the figure representing time because he could see into the past with one face and into the future with the other.

Like Janus, we are compelled to look back on the past year and look forward to the coming year. Many take time to reflect on what transpired and what was learned over the previous year and then dream about new opportunities or resolutions for going forward.

As we turn to 2010 we look forward to continuing our work with our clients

in facilitating Invention Workshops, Opportunity Foresight and Scenario Planning cycles. The body of knowledge we developed over the past decade with our Innovation Practitioners Network is being disseminated through senior fellows in several of our client organizations; and we will be coaching innovators, their sponsors and innovation network participants.

Lanny also hopes to complete his book, *Prisoners of Hope: How Innovators Get Lift*, the writing of which has been a highlight of 2009.

We feel a deep sense of gratitude and humility for the confidence that many of you place in us to provide the advice, counsel and facilitative support to you and your innovation efforts. It is a privilege and joy to work with so many committed and experienced innovators. □

# Vincent & Associates, Ltd. Begins 20th Year in Business

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the entrance of many consulting firms and business school sub-specialty programs focused on innovation. The flood tide has not ebbed, even amidst this Great Recession. Like a persistent flood, the shallow low-lying areas that used to be visible get washed out. What now appear as broader channels for innovating, actually end up being even more treacherous to those first-time innovators who navigate its challenges. Many of the charted shoals have become covered over with thin layers of processes and techniques. Many innovators have unfortunately run aground, while others have been left high and dry.

As a result, we thought the occasion of this new year presents a chance to remind many of you what we believe are some enduring principles and practices for managing innovation. These lessons have stood the test of time for innovators, their sponsors and managers.

## **Content precedes process, just as form follows function.**

You would think this would go without saying, but there is a torrent of process techniques being pitched that many mistakenly substitute for clear, coherent direction. Many executives say, “we need more innovation,” yet few do their homework to confidently direct their innovators to where innovations are needed and why. When leaders do this homework, their innovator networks respond vigorously and quickly, and, most importantly, in the right territories.

### **R. S. V. P.**

Please send us your thoughts on this issue of *Innovating Perspectives*.

### **Vincent & Associates, Ltd.**

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## **Nothing happens except out of relationships.**

The white knight syndrome and the myth of the lone entrepreneur persist, but they belie the facts. If you look closely at companies with historically high rates of innovation, you will find not a lone individual but a vibrant, enduring relationship. Bill Hewlett and David Packard. Walt and Roy Disney. Paul Allen and Bill Gates. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. It seems extrinsic compensation, reward and recognition practices are hard pressed to compete with the undeniable reality that the human relationship is the intrinsic heart of the innovation engine. Think of the music that jazz musicians make when they get together to jam. Innovations at first are not marches but melodies.

## **Success is the enemy of innovation.**

Innovating is disruptive by definition, especially to the incumbent who is inclined to defend his position. Companies that underestimate the resistance to innovation within their own organizations tend to be chronically disappointed with the returns on their innovation investments. Without sufficient and appropriate insulation, innovation efforts will remain unnecessarily vulnerable to “sibling rivalry” from existing and cash generating operations in the core business.

## **“Innovation is learning applied to creating value.”**

This was how Al Ward (an expert in Toyota’s development system) defined innovation. Innovating is a risky, no-guarantee kind of activity. There is a better than 50-50 chance the innovation-in-development will not prove to be a commercial success. However, if knowledge is created in the process—knowledge that can and will be used in the next iteration—success can be viewed as a succession of adaptations, rather than a one-time embodiment. An older expression may be “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Providing value to the end user trumps newness if you are looking for competitive differentiation, particularly when the vision of the innovation’s value

allows us the patience for growth and sustains our efforts over multiple tries.

## **Play is the tuition for adaptability.**

The science of play teaches us that our species’ ability to adapt and evolve is a direct result of the confidence we learn and gain in earlier play experiences. Innovation begins at the boundaries between order and chaos. Without order nothing can exist. Without chaos nothing can evolve. The ability of an organization to convert the “noise” at these boundaries into meaningful “signals”—even into innovations—derives from its freedom and ability to play. Simulations, thought and field experiments, scenario planning and messing around in the lab all contribute to the innovation’s survival and success.

When our organizations become too lean, they can become too mean not only in temperament, but also in average performance. When asked about innovation at Apple, Steve Jobs replied, “We don’t talk about innovation. We just talk about making insanely great products.” By definition, innovations are not average, nor even close to the mean.

Certainly other principles and practices of innovation may be of equal importance, depending upon the particular competitive, technological or organizational conditions that confront the innovator. A few of these principles include:

- Paying attention to subtle surprises in the market or the development lab;
- Getting your innovation into the market with sufficient alertness to catch the serendipity;
- Giving yourself permission to fail so that real learning can occur; and
- Managing like a loving parent, neither too permissive nor dogmatic about early performance.

Instead of people looking for a formula for how-to do innovation, we need more innovators, sponsors and leaders who believe in the inspirations that can come from necessity. After all, as the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. □