

ALWAYS INNOVATING

by Maud Roucan-Kane and Dr. Michael Boehlje

When doing the weekly shopping, it's impossible to miss the new products lining the shelves. Customers are often like kids — they get bored with current toys and are always looking for newer, better, super toys.

As an agri-manager, you are facing the same dilemma: how to serve your customer base by offering them better and more innovative products and services. In the spirit of innovation, this discussion provides some tips to better service your customers and maintain a loyal customer-base.

A recent book by **Tom Kelley**, *"The Ten Faces of Innovation,"* highlights some great concepts to make a firm more innovative. The roles can be organized into three categories as shown in the table.

Different people in the organization can play different roles based on their skills and interests. In some cases, the key managers may play more than one role or wear more than one hat.

As an agri-marketer, you have many opportunities to apply your anthropologist skills. For example, precision agriculture and site specific production is discussed a lot today. Understanding the problems farmers have using the equipment, understanding the results, or determining whether they have a need for the product is critical to selling this new technology. Search out clues on how to market these products better. Communicate with manufacturers on which parts of the technology could be improved, how the user manual could be more explanatory, or how results could be better presented.

Seed companies are developing new traits to make ethanol plants more efficient in their use of corn. As an agri-marketer, this new avenue is a great opportunity for a hurdler. Right now, ethanol plants are not paying farmers based on the extractable starch content of corn. As a hurdler, it's an occasion to assist

Category	Role	Definition	Illustrative Activities
Learner	Anthropologist	Watches and analyzes customers.	Watches customers in many different ways; talks to customers; looks at what competitors are doing; watches the trends in the market.
	Experimenter	Experiments, prototypes new ideas and products.	Experiments with solutions and prototypes; looks for new materials and methods; evaluates new delivery formats.
	Cross-pollinator	Applies concepts from one area to another.	Leverages innovation from one department/industry into another; reads trade press, books and magazines; travels and meets different people with different backgrounds.
Organizer	Hurdler	Overcomes hurdles when he/she believes in a project.	Solves problems; finds innovative solutions.
	Collaborator	Knows how to deal, lead and motivate people.	Leads focus groups, organizes teams and uses brainstorming sessions; listens to criticisms; communicates information to employees; hosts clients.
	Director	Makes strategic decisions; inspires and directs people.	Promotes people to jobs to capitalize on their abilities to innovate; compiles a list of "problems worth solving."
Builder	Experience Architect	Figures out ways to make the customer experience extraordinary.	Trains employees to be extremely courteous and helpful; recognizes and rewards loyal customers.
	Set designer	Designs sets (offices, stores) that are welcoming and enjoyable to work in.	Creates environments that are conducive to productivity and innovation; arranges pleasant welcoming areas or stores for customers.
	Caregiver	Helps customers.	Makes customers feel comfortable; answers questions; communicates with customers.
	Storyteller	Tells stories	Transforms facts into stories; shares experiences with others.

ethanol plants in understanding the value of higher extractable starch corn, the need to change their payment procedure, communicate the changes to the farmers, and sell farmers the new trait.

Selling horse feed to a high-income rural politan is a great opportunity to use your storytelling and caregiving skills. Try to understand the needs of the customer, and then explain in plain English the advantages and drawbacks of each of your available product.

There are a few basic principles to keep in mind when trying to stimulate innovation within your organization. Hire people with different backgrounds (culture, religion, coun-

try, education), as it will spur more innovative ideas. Tap into the resources of interns and young employees, as they are not constrained by historical choices or the blinders others within the firm may have. Loyal customers are tired of getting gifts that gather dust; they want an experience — take them on a fishing trip or buy them a few tickets to a **Purdue** football game. **AM**

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