How to Steer Clear of Gimmicks When You're Strategizing Your Prototype

Exciting new technologies are emerging every day, but just mashing them together isn't the way to make a compelling product. Instead, follow these steps to create a genuine product that solves a real problem.

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Just when you thought Mercedes couldn't pack any more features into its vehicles, its owner, Daimler, partnered with Garmin. The wearable manufacturer recently revealed plans to provide health data through the Mercedes Me app, which enables vehicles to monitor drivers' health characteristics, such as heart rate and stress levels, then address them.

So how does this look in execution? If drivers show high stress levels, fthe vehicle can show them less stressful routes through the navigation screen. In the future, these features may potentially include playing soothing music from the infotainment system or changing the car's fragrance or ambient lighting.

These offerings at face value might seem like innovation. But look at them more closely and they begin to feel like a gimmick. Wearable healthcare tools have amazing potential to do good and solve problems, but this move by Mercedes seems out of step with that mission. In a world where many things have beauty but no meaning, companies should instead opt to

innovate *intentionally.*

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Forget the “cool” factor and instead focus on solutions.

Like many initiatives, the Garmin-Daimler partnership is trying to solve something that isn’t a problem. A few people might find the product interesting, but it will never generate enough momentum to reach a critical mass and advance itself in the marketplace. Early adopters who pick up the technology are just as likely to put it back down because there’s no stick factor, no engagement and no utility. Without a good reason for it to be used time and again, the product is destined to end up on the Island of Misfit Technology.

The lesson? Be wary of innovation that simply combines stand-alone technology. Wearable devices and smart cars are both exciting on their own, but simply mashing them together doesn’t necessarily lead to a match made in heaven.

Imagine that instead of putting monitoring technology into Mercedes-Benz vehicles, Garmin put it into ambulances. Instead of soothing drivers in rush-hour traffic through the use of ambient lighting and the scent of lavender, the remote monitoring technology could inform health providers about changes in patient vitals before the ambulance has pulled up to the emergency room door. Now, that would be *real* innovation.

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Finding the “real” problem

As you narrow down an idea and pinpoint a market need, you

need to find a way that your product or service can solve a real problem. You need to create something bold that serves a purpose. To do that, follow these steps to test and release a successful product that won't translate into another empty gimmick:

1. Test your idea to gauge its potential.

No product is perfect, and all products need to be tested. Start by selecting a subgroup from your ideal primary audience to try out your prototype, then expand it by including more ancillary users who might have found the product on their own. Feel free to tap into your own network, too, but not exclusively.

Testing can have huge impacts on success. Twitter, for example, wisely opted to test new features with a limited selection of users by rolling out the "Twttr" app. With the insights gleaned from this beta test, Twitter ensured that almost all eventual changes to its app would most likely incite positive reactions.

2. Create, recreate, repeat.

Make changes to position your product or service in a logical way. The first iteration will rarely be the last, and it's possible that it might look nothing like the finished product. Dig deeply and talk to as many people as possible to gather as much feedback as you can. Whether that feedback be from mentors, designers or customers, hearing from others can inspire your "aha" moment and lead to the best, most meaningful version of your product.

Adopt a rapid prototyping model to test wireframes and design assumptions early on before coding is long under way. Nielsen recommends testing at least 20 users to generate statistically

significant results, a number that could go even higher if the differences between versions are few.

A great example of a company using this approach is New Age Meats. It allowed a handful of prospective investors and journalists to taste its prototype of pork sausages made from animal cells. Because one of the biggest hurdles for this company is achieving great texture, getting feedback early and adjusting accordingly has been vital.

3. Let analysis drive your end prototype.

Take the time to understand how long average users need to complete a task or why they get frustrated when using your product. Ask questions to understand their behaviors, and share your findings with stakeholders in order to create a complete product road map.

Ultimately, as you get your bearings and experience success, aim for bigger achievements with the understanding that they might bring bigger failures. For example, SpaceX keeps aiming for bigger achievements, which naturally leads to bigger — and more highly publicized — failures. After a video was released of SpaceX's *Dragon* capsule exploding, the company confirmed that the spacecraft was destroyed during testing.

But, as Jeff Bezos explained to shareholders, "If the size of your failures isn't growing, you're not going to be inventing at a size that can actually move the needle."

Related: Startups Jumping Into the Fray to Tap Wearable Healthcare Industry

Promising technology is emerging everywhere you look, which means it's easier than ever to pair amazing new technology and hope for the best. But that's not the way to make a compelling

product. Instead, create something genuine and intentional that solves a real problem, and then watch it turn into the next big thing.

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