

# Writings by Kathie Hightower

## One Key to Innovation: Listen to Your Customers

by Kathie Hightower

Our friend John showed up for cross-country skiing with the latest toy — a Camelback water holder on his back. As we asked questions about it — how much does it hold, how much did it cost — one comment he made slid by me quickly only to hit me hard later on.

“I used it for the first time snowboarding the other day,” he said. “That’s the first time I haven’t had cramps in my legs.”

A week later I was at the Snoqualmie Ski Resort with my sister. She had finally convinced me to try downhill skiing again for the first time in eleven years. As I automatically started to strap on the butt pack and water bottle holder I use for hiking and cross-country skiing, I realized that it probably would get in the way of the my poles — and would make it difficult to sit on the lift. So I left it behind. And realized I’d have to leave my water bottle in the rental place next to my shoes. So I took a last swig and headed out.

Two hours later I realized I was extremely thirsty, a sure sign that dehydration has already set in. I had to ski back to the rental place, take my skis off and clomp into the building in order to get some water.

I stood outside drinking and watching the rest of the skiers and snowboarders. Not a water bottle in sight. No water fountains easily accessible. Now, let’s think about this. I’ve studied exercise for years and we’ve all been told over and over how important it is to stay hydrated. When I work out at the Y, that message has taken hold. Everyone I see carries a water bottle or makes frequent trips to the water fountain.

I thought immediately, “If I were in charge of marketing for Camelback, I’d jump on this. There’s a huge market in downhill skiers and snowboarders — people already primed to spend lots of money on their favorite sport. All you’d have to do is point out how this would improve your performance.” Of course, you might also want to decorate those Camelbacks in some “Xtreme” designs and colors to appeal to this crowd. And get some top skier’s and snowboarders to endorse them. But I’m getting away from the first idea here.

And that is — one way to be innovative in business is to ask yourself how people are using your product. Very often it isn’t automatically in the way you expected them to use it. Customers are very creative — they’ll show you ways to expand your business if you pay attention and listen.

- When Avon came out with Skin So Soft I’m sure there wasn’t a thought of “Hey, we can use it for mosquito repellent.” The customers figured that out and word spread. I wonder what percentage of sales come from mosquito-repellent stories rather than moisturizing properties? Recently a friend of mine announced in our women’s group that she was doing a bike ride in New Orleans and was concerned about the mosquitoes at that time of year. Four of us immediately said, “Get Avon’s Skin-So-Soft.” Not one of the four uses Avon products but we all knew about this. That is powerful word-of-mouth marketing.

- Arm & Hammer Baking Soda was developed to use in baking. Before long, there was a box in almost every refrigerator in America, absorbing odors. (Okay, that may be a bit of stretch but you get the point.) Arm & Hammer picked up on that fact and created a box made for the refrigerator—with a little screen over the opening to avoid spills. They went on to consider “Where else are there odors to absorb?” and before long, people were using it in kitty litter boxes. Eventually they came out with their own brand of kitty litter with the baking soda already included.

What’s good for the kitty litter box is good for...your mouth?! I can’t imagine who ever thought of putting baking soda in their mouth to clean their teeth — that would never have crossed my mind! But someone did. (I don’t know, maybe it was someone thinking “Where else are there odors to absorb?”) The company paid attention and before you knew it, you have toothpaste made with baking soda.

- I was thrilled to see Rubbermaid’s new “Hip Hugger” laundry basket. I can’t tell you how many plastic laundry baskets I’ve ruined by holding them on one side with the other against my hip as I opened the door to the laundry area, eventually breaking the plastic. Someone at Rubbermaid obviously noticed “How do our customers use it?” and created this new basket. It has a curve on one side for your hip — and handle’s on three sides you can carry it on your hip or out in front of you.

- Somehow someone noticed that people were losing weight by eating Subway Sandwiches. Did a customer write in and tell them? Did a local clerk just notice a frequent customer dropping weight dramatically? I don’t know, but the company paid attention. They used the weight loss in their marketing campaigns. Now, in this country, any trick to help you lose weight — especially one that TELLS you to eat fast food — is bound to grab our attention. It must be working. Subway has recently surpassed McDonald’s as the number one fast food franchise in America.

So listen to your customers. Hey, I wonder if Camelback will give me a free gift for this idea? I could use a Camelback for my next ski trip. 2002, Kathie Hightower

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