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Inspired by inspiration

By Jeff Patmore, head of strategic university research, BT

I've been mulling this question lately. How do you come up with a new idea? How do you come up with a 'killer app' that allows you to differentiate your product from the rest?

I'm still not sure there is a right or wrong answer, but it did remind me of how we developed our new ideas for the internet TV service, BT Vision. We were trying to figure out how to differentiate our TV service from others. In the early days we exhausted a number of different avenues and tapped into research into social media by social scientists at Cambridge. But we drew a blank.

We tried a brainstorming session that identified 'automated personal recommendation systems' among TV viewers as a potential differentiator. But it was clear that many TV services already did this – and quite well too. We were stumped. And there, for a while, the thinking stopped.

Until we heard from our BT visiting scientist at MIT, who reported in September 2008 that he had attended a discussion entitled: Innovation at the Edge: Social TV and Beyond. The lead researcher for this, Marie-Jose Monpetit, had written a short paper in which she painted a picture of a future of TV.

This was it. This was our 'eureka' moment. Her vision was in tune with ours. And it was just the trigger we needed.

Re-energised

But although Marie-Jose agreed to collaborate with us, our marketing people needed to be convinced about our ideas. Re-energised, we needed to find a way to progress the research. Luckily, as these things tend to happen, at about the same time we were introduced to an exceptional young undergraduate at MIT, Tanya Goldhaber, who was studying Engineering with Brain and Cognitive Science. She jumped at the chance to join us for a summer internship.

During these months we carried out research that challenged the notion that consumers wanted hundreds of channels. Instead, we found a direct correlation between the number of channels and user frustration; 'the crisis of choice'. In other words, people wanted a choice of channels, but too many merely led to people channel-hopping during programme breaks, feeling that there must be something better out there.

Linked to this, we found that electronic programme guides (EPGs) are fine for a relatively small number of channels. But when there are hundreds to choose from, people found them frustrating and difficult to navigate.

We were on a roll

As we continued our research – inspired by Marie-Jose and developed by our intern – we helped to shape our proposition for BT Vision. Indeed, not only did our intern develop ideas, she ran two field trials and presented our new approach to senior management.

Thinking back, I wonder just how many traditional large companies can say that a 21 year old summer intern can approach their chief executive, without an appointment, and pitch her ideas and be listened to?

At BT we have been through a great deal of change over the last couple of years and one of the very positive changes has been the cultural one that allows a key business problem to be opened up to those best suited to solve it; and a culture where the senior management team is open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. These are the changes that will really drive innovation.

