

# 25 Essential Innovation Prompts

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## 25 ESSENTIAL INNOVATION PROMPTS

Innovation is no fun when you're staring down an oppressively blank sheet of paper, but you don't have to go it alone. Here's my list of 25 prompts guaranteed to get the innovation juices flowing, a list distilled from my speeches and workshops and work as an innovation culture consultant.

1. **Borrow a concept from nature.** Earthworms that are cut in half can't actually regenerate from both pieces, but that we want it to be true shows that it's a great concept. Caterpillars metamorphosing into butterflies, owls seeing at night, and don't forget the humble mouse that became an essential adjunct to the graphic user interface (GUI).
2. **Channel a particular visionary or vision.** Take your product or service and Bob Fosse it or Jony Ive it or Frank Lloyd Wright it or Oprah it. Even though we consider Bambi to be as American as French fries, it in fact drew its distinctive look from ancient Chinese art.
3. **Take an approach from another industry.** What would Starbucks do? Walmart? Cleveland Clinic? Harley Davidson? Drybar? The Genius Bar isn't something the Apple Stores borrowed from Best Buy or another electronics retailer; rather, they emulated

the concierge areas long established in luxury hotels to come up with this wildly-successful feature of the Apple Stores.

4. **Try the opposite of your normal approach, or look for opportunities at the other end of the process.** You're trying to be the cheapest provider, but what would the premium version look like? Right now you sell diapers, but the diaper market is, uh, saturated. How about diaper disposal?
5. **Invoke a different emotion.** Maybe you are selling on fear, but you should be selling on hope. Or vice versa.
6. **Change the terms:** rent vs. buy, long-term vs. short-term, etc. Disney succeeds in getting people to "invest" in buying DVD and Blu-ray even in this world of streaming, while Netflix, Audible, and many others have succeeded by going in more or less the opposite direction, promoting a subscription model, where nothing is owned or even rented.
7. **Change the timing.** Sell them breakfast when you were previously only open for lunch and dinner (McDonald's); for that matter, sell them breakfast all day! Promote health-club membership purchases in August instead of around New Year's. Ask customers to join your loyalty program at a different moment in their relationship with you. Offer them a drink while the plane is still languishing on the ground, rather than waiting until mid-flight.
8. **Invent or embrace "off-label" uses.** Invent new uses for your existing product, or embrace the ways that customers are already using your product that are different from your original intention.
9. **Combine existing elements.** Even though early smartphones weren't particularly great as phones (soundwise) or as cameras (quality-wise), the combination of features—the ability to have your camera everywhere your phone is, and to have it connected to the rest of the world via a phone "line"—has changed the world.

10. **Remove features.** Do your customers actually want the mish-mash of features you're including, or do they feel, rightly or wrongly, that your "generosity" means they're paying for features they never use?
11. **Add features.** Maybe your product or service doesn't include everything they want. What's missing?
12. **Do what you do but in a different medium.** Substituting voice recognition for keyboard input is essential to the "magic trick" effect of Siri, et. al.
13. **Add humor.** Example: the world-famous CD Baby confirmation letter, which turns a typically boring touchpoint (the email shipping confirmation for the customer's order) as a way to get across the soul of its brand and build a bond with the customer, through humorous hyperbole.
14. **Add nostalgia.** The Hanx Writer that turns your i-device into a typewriter, complete with clanking keys and appropriate sounds when you "return the carriage" is an adorable example of this approach.
15. **Pay attention to a neglected part of your offering.** Think about how Tiffany took a mundane aspect of their product, the box, and made it essential to the Tiffany experience.
16. **Try to turn your product or service into a habit, or a ritual.** Ronald McDonald House succeeded in creating a charitable donation ritual by putting the donation box right under the drive-in window.
17. **Involve the crowd.** Crowdsourcing can also be valuable in product design and other areas as well. When you involve the crowd not only do you get the value of the crowd's wisdom, you can endear your brand to that crowd, through the participation opportunity you offered them.
18. **Make it self-service.** Some customers want to do everything for themselves (at least when it's late at night and they're half in

the bag). Maybe your product offering is perfect apart from the requirement that a customer interact with a human being to place an offer. Try a self-service option and see if things take off.

19. **Resist making it self-service.** Air New Zealand intentionally designed their business class cabins to require flight attendant intervention when you want to make up your lay-flat bed. They could have made it all automatic (like it is on other carriers) with the bedding already in place for you to use whenever you like, but they chose to add the human touchpoint of having a flight attendant interact with you when it is bedtime. (This isn't a right or wrong choice until your customers deem it one way or the other, so give it a try and see how it works out.)
20. **Add a social element.** The 1888 Hotel in Sydney could be just another hotel (a nice one, actually), but it has transformed itself by turning itself into a "sharing destination" for Instagram enthusiasts, mapping out all the great Instagram locations (and even building a human-sized picture frame in its lobby). There are many other ways to socialize your offering that are more subtle than this one and can also improve the appeal of your product or service.
21. **Make it smaller.** Some things that become more valuable when you miniaturize them or make them portable, like laptops vs. desktops.
22. **Make it bigger.** Some products or services only work if lots of people are already using them. This was the sticking point for fax machines: they weren't useful until they were in use. So maybe your first goal should be to build up a large network of users first, rather than making money on any particular individual (early) customer.
23. **Explain it better.** Maybe you don't need a new product, maybe you need a three-minute video to orient new users so they don't return it on arrival to Amazon.

- 24. Solve something everyone else has accepted as “the way things are.”** Can you create a market-ready wheelchair that climbs stairs—even though everybody has accepted that they don’t? (This may be the classic innovation prompt, and it’s still a great one.)
- 25. Accept rather than solve, but monetize that acceptance.** In a classic social psychology experiment, when parents were penalized \$5 for picking up their kids late at daycare, instead of acting as a deterrent, the opportunity to pay for overtime was embraced by parents, because now they knew “what it cost.” Although this wasn’t the goal of the daycare provider (they just wanted kids to go home at the designated time), this shows how a customer desire can be monetized once you stop objecting to it. Likewise, smart movie theaters that have reacted to complaints by theatergoers about people bring babies to movies by initiating separate showings where parents with babies aren’t only tolerated but are expected and invited.