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The Power of Imagination

Jay Walker on the fuel that drives innovation

Jay S. Walker founded Priceline.com and is curator of TEDMED, a group dedicated to improving the future of health and medicine. Here are edited excerpts from his remarks at the Unleashing Innovation conference.

Tedmed curator Jay Walker talks about the history of great ideas and shows off an illustrated book woven entirely in silk--a breakthrough marketing tool pitching an 18th-century revolution in loom technology.

On why imagination has been undervalued for so long: For most of human history, there was a ruling class and then there was everybody else. If you were part of everybody else, it wasn't your job to imagine a different future, different ways of doing things. So, imagination is a fairly modern phenomenon. It really only takes force in the 1800s in the way we think of it today, where you can make a living and not get killed for being imaginative.

On encouraging imagination: People talk about wanting more innovation. But innovation is a process result. Imagination is the fuel. You're not going to get innovation if you don't have imagination. Most organizations do not value imagination, do not encourage it, do not reward it. In many cases, they don't even think about it. But if you're not thinking about imagination, I guarantee you're not going to have meaningful innovation.

On why imagination is crucial for business: Imagination drives good problem formation because imagination thinks about customers. What might my customers want tomorrow? What might my customers want in six months, a year, two years that they don't want today? That's imagination. And that's hard work. There's no right or wrong answer, there's nobody there to say, "You did it perfectly. Here's your bonus for that."

The issue is not to ask your customers what they want today, but to try to imagine what the customer is going to want in a world where, for instance, their cellphone is in their glasses. What is my customer going to want in a world with transparency, where they are able to talk to every one of my other customers? If you ask your customers what they want, you will not get disruptive innovation.

On how an imaginative leap changed the world: London, 1665, was the last great year of the Plague. The king was getting tired of people claiming they were dead and not paying their tax, so the English came up with a great idea: You needed a certificate to die.

Then somebody said, "Each week, why don't we write down all the reasons people died this week, and we'll issue that as a weekly summary for the king."

Here's what happens next: They see a pattern in the data—and nobody had ever seen a pattern in data before. They had seen patterns in your palm. They had seen patterns in the sky. But this was patterns in the data.

Then they realize, people aren't dying because God is killing them. They're dying because there's some kind of statistical probability projection going on. So, from this one book, three industries—statistics, life insurance and public health—are born.

On why the medical field resists imagination: If you're a doctor, what do you promise to do? First, do no harm. If your operating philosophy is do no harm, that's not a call to imagination. Not only that, if I'm a patient, I don't want your imagination. I want what works.

Also, for most of history, doctors killed more people than anybody other than the military. In the modern era, we've learned that because we're wrong so often, we would rather be right slower than be wrong fast.

That's not how Silicon Valley works. That's not how most businesses work that serve customers. But when customers are people with life-or-death issues on the line, you can't blame the medical community for that.