

# Taking Business Lessons from Pinterest

BY CHAD MCCLLOUD

Innovations from businesses are constantly changing our world in the form of new products and customer experiences.

Anyone who has ever been part of a brainstorming session knows that it's the process of innovation that's the hard part. True innovation is difficult to generate, and even harder to repeat. The scarcity of inspiration is what drives companies to look for new and interesting ways to acquire it.

A relatively new website called Pinterest provides a refreshing perspective on the pursuit of inspiration. Quickly becoming one of the more addictive sites on the web, Pinterest is a global bulletin board for images that inspire, trigger laughter, or are just plain cool. Members can post images of virtually anything, categorize them for easy reference, and create their own "bulletin boards" with other images that interest them. Some of us have lost loved ones to Facebook or reality TV; it's a good bet that within the next year, you will lose a loved one to Pinterest.

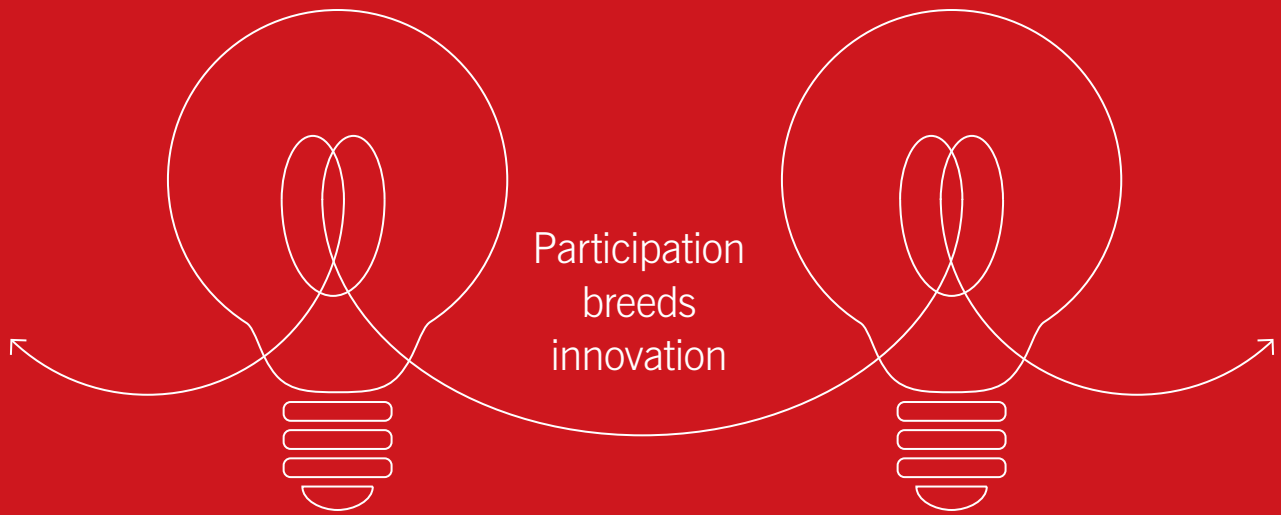
People use Pinterest for more reasons than I can fathom, but what struck me instantly was the spirit of innovation within and among the posted images. Some images show a creative combination of concepts that aren't normally associated with one another. An example of this is an image that merges a staircase and a bookshelf by turning each step into its own shelf of books. The collection of these images, when viewed together on a page, starts to form a neural network of interconnected and inspirational ideas.

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THERE ARE A NUMBER OF LESSONS THAT INNOVATING BUSINESSES CAN BORROW FROM PINTEREST:

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- **Make innovation a visual experience.** Traditional brainstorming sessions use white boards to capture ideas with words, but the use of images and videos brings something much more sensory. A Product Manager for a software company might view a visually appealing trend graphic from Mint.com and find an applicable enhancement to her own product, much more interesting than a verbal description of enhanced reporting.
- **Participation breeds innovation.** As Thomas Edison quipped, "To have a great idea, have a lot of them." When more than four million people use Pinterest to post ideas, there are bound to be some pretty amazing doses of inspiration. The site makes it uncommonly easy for millions of members to pin, search, and browse through volumes of content quickly. Just think about what's possible when businesses expand innovation efforts across the entire company, or even to their customers.
- **Quick! Innovate in the next 10 minutes!** Many of us have a hard time innovating when our time for innovation is locked in a schedule between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. on Tuesday. If your best ideas come from the treadmill, the shower, or over a cup of coffee on Saturday morning, then providing a place to post ideas allows innovation to occur beyond the constraints of the calendar. Pinterest does this exceedingly well.



Expanding the number of ideas will only take businesses so far. Companies who are famous for innovation use structured approaches to channel their inspirations into new products and experiences that generate real revenue. Here are three structural steps that can maximize the impact of the lessons above:

1. **Start with a goal.** Pinterest members use the site for everything from collecting and expressing their individual styles to finding sources of good ideas. Business innovation only works when there is a defined goal combined with facilitation towards that goal. Examples of goals include generating new product ideas and enhancing existing ones, or creating different ways to search, catalogue, and connect.
2. **Inspire innovation by building upon the “known.”** Most people have a hard time generating inspiring ideas out of thin air. When presented with a tangible idea, most of us can build upon that idea and take it a few steps further or in a new direction entirely.
3. **Encourage collaboration on top of affirmation.** Many of the comments we see on Pinterest are affirmative in nature (“I like it!”). While positive feedback encourages participation, encouraging collaboration among the innovators can iteratively lead to improvisational yet critical steps toward

a break-through idea. Facilitators who draw out and link ideas through contiguity and contrast help focus the chaos of creativity into applied solutions. As Steve Jobs once said, “Creativity is just connecting things.”

Companies who infuse some of the lessons from Pinterest into their own innovation efforts are bound to find ideas that they never dreamed possible. At the very least, they will walk away with new visions for remodeling the kitchen.

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