
Section 3

**THE LONG AND
WINDING ROAD**

3M and the Post-it Note

Developing new products is a sticky business

THE POST-IT NOTE WAS NOT INVENTED IN A SHED BY AN aspiring inventor who was then able to single-handedly get the product to market. Its success is credited to two salary men, Art Fry and Spence Silver, who worked as research scientists at diversified technology company 3M.

Silver invented the not-so-sticky glue on the Post-it Note in 1968 while he was experimenting with glues to use with adhesive tape. Silver's adhesive was revolutionary because it could stick and come unstuck without ruining the surface it touched. He couldn't find a real use for the adhesive, but he kept plugging away, promoting his "low-tack" adhesive to other researchers within 3M, hoping to spark some interest.

It was another scientist, Art Fry, who, after attending one of Silver's presentations, came to see a commercial use for the glue. During a church choir rehearsal, Fry became irritated when the paper markers he used to mark pages in his hymn book kept falling out. He realized that if he used Silver's adhesive on the paper notes, he could mark the pages with sticky bookmarks without damaging the book. Bingo.

But the development of this practical, original product was a slow process. Even five years after Silver created his adhesive, commercialization of the Post-it Note was barely plodding along. Some 3M executives thought the Post-it Note would be competing with scrap paper and therefore people would never pay for the 3M alternative.

Nonetheless, Fry kept working on his pet project, setting up a machine in his basement that could apply the sticky adhesive to rolls of paper. Fry has always maintained that problems are par for the course in the innovation process. “A lot of my type of folks just love problems that have stumped others or that have not even been recognized by others as a problem,” he said. “People just love to create things and they tend to love and nourish what they create.”

The first market tests of the product in 1977 were not encouraging. But 3M did its own in-house trials and found that the staff was beginning to use Post-it Notes as a new way of communicating, leaving them as reminders here, there, and everywhere. The company was still in two minds when a 3M executive arranged to have Post-its (then known as “Press and Peel” notes) tested in a town called Boise in Virginia to see if people would buy them, but the response was overwhelmingly positive, and the Post-it Note was saved from extinction.

When the Post-it Note was finally launched in 1980, it was an instant success. There are now more than 1,000 varieties of Post-it Notes on the market. Fry stayed with 3M, rising up through the ranks and winning international awards, until his retirement after forty years with the company.

3M has a track record for clever inventions, from disposable diaper closure tape and CFC-free inhalers to fiber-optic network connections and Scotch Magic Tape. The company has interests in the industrial, consumer, transportation, and healthcare sectors, has developed the careers of more than 7,000 scientists, and registers hundreds of patents each year. It also has a policy of allowing scientists to spend a proportion of their work time on personal scientific projects.

As a publicly listed company, 3M needs to continue to generate serious revenue from its ideas. In 2004, 3M had sales of more than \$20 billion and several hundred million of that figure can be attributed to the Post-it Note. The hope for the scientists and the long-term bottom line of the company is that staff will continue

to have time to develop their ideas. Perhaps 3M management should heed Art Fry's words: "If we discover something, we have a chance to stop and look at it. This is very important because lots of things are discovered and passed by because everybody's too busy."

NOTES

- "**A lot of my type . . .**" O'Leary, Christopher K. "The Pain Papers Newsletter #6," The Power of Pain.com, 8.31.01.
- "**People just love . . .**" O'Leary, Christopher K. "The Pain Papers Newsletter #6," The Power of Pain.com, 8.31.01.
- "**If we discover . . .**" Bob Black, Great Ideas for Living, GreatIdeasforLiving.com.

REFERENCES

SAM Advance Management Journal, vol. 52 number 3, summer 1987.

3M.com, *BBC News*, *BusinessWeek*, *The Guardian*, Hoovers Company Capsules, *The Independent*, Inventors.About.com, Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Engineering, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*