

Lightning in a Bottle:

Does Your New Idea Have It?

By Mark R. Nicolas

Do you have a new product or service that will propel your company to the next level, or is it just another “solution” in search of a problem? The answer is crucial to the success of the idea, perhaps even your job. You could spend a fortune in market research. But here is a simple first step to discovering if your new product or service is “lightning in a bottle,” or just a big fizzle waiting to happen.

Don't Fall In Love Too Soon

When it comes to new products and services, you may be susceptible to love blindness. You can become so enamored with the cleverness of your new product or service, especially if it's your own creation, that you lose sight of the most important question: Will it appeal to people in the marketplace? The future of your new idea hinges squarely on reliable answers to this question.

After all, if you're not offering new, different, or enhanced benefits that people care about, what have you really got? Problem is, when you're creating and brainstorming at 1 AM, the things you assume are of prime importance to others may be of secondary significance in the harsh daylight of marketplace reality.

Business success is almost always based on solid planning, sound strategy, and objectivity. Luck plays a part, but only a minor supporting role. If you go off blindly “full speed in all directions” counting on luck, you'll probably encounter a brick wall long before you find success.



Here is a simple approach to making sure your instincts, best guesses, and assumptions won't lead you to frustration and failure.

Forget Your Friends, Ignore Your Family

The first step in discovering if you have “lightning in a bottle” with your new product or service is to talk directly to those in the market: qualified prospects experienced in your target marketplace. And you need help to do it.

Your friends can't tell you the truth about your new idea because they're not qualified, and family members are notorious liars because they don't want to hurt your feelings. Co-workers bring their own personal, professional, and political biases. Least of all should you trust your own instincts. You're already in love with the idea. Besides, you've got a vested interest in putting a positive spin on the idea. If you do your own research, you'll end up selling instead of fact-finding. That's why you need some qualified, outside objective help.



Low Cost Focus Groups

We're talking about investing in basic focus groups as a reasonable first step to test new ideas. The cost can be under \$5000. per group to do it right. Depending on the idea and the market, you may need more groups for dependable input. Generally speaking, the more you have at stake, the more conservative the approach. Therefore you need as many iterations as you can afford. Because you are trying to quantify the subjective, you'll get more reliable results from larger numbers of participants, which means more groups.

OK. We're in our focus group. The first thing to do is find out from our participants what goes into their buying decision in this class of product or service. What benefits constitute genuine value, as far as they are concerned? These are things such as speed, economy, ease of use, convenience, sturdiness, etc. The list varies by category.

You might think that anybody can make a reasonable guess at what these key benefits are. But we often see a company's basic internal assumptions rudely overturned by focus group participants. Be grateful when this happens. Remember, you are interested in the idea's actual potential, not protecting your pride. On the other hand, if your assumptions were right, you may gain credibility for your personal judgment, and perhaps more support for your marketing budget.

Building A Grid

Once prospects tell you what is important (our list of benefits and attributes), we have an undifferentiated, unweighed list. So, next we ask people HOW IMPORTANT each benefit/attribute is, from 1 to 10, with 10 being most important.

Very Important	10	(Benefit "A" for illustration purposes)
	9	
	8	(Benefit "D" and "E")
	7	
	6	
	5	(Benefit "B")
	4	
	3	
	2	
	Not Important	1

Simple so far. But already you can see how revealing this can be. Instead of thinking everything is important, which is the same as saying nothing is important, we begin to objectively differentiate the relative importance of each benefit. By averaging multiple

responses, you can place each benefit in the appropriate place on the scale.

Next we ask people HOW SATISFIED they are with the benefits provided by what's available to them now. After all, if your new idea is to succeed it will usually be replacing or competing with an existing product or service. (True innovations, or new product categories, are more rare in mature markets than in emerging ones. It may be that your new idea is revolutionary. Our experience indicates that most successful new products and services are improvements on existing ones.)

Again, we rank these same benefits/attributes from 1 to 10.

Very Satisfied					Unsatisfied				
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
B		A		E		C		D	

When we combine the two scales, IMPORTANCE and SATISFACTION, we create a grid. If you have "lightning in a bottle," this grid is where it shows up.

Finding the "Lightning"

You can pretty much ignore the benefits that fall in the bottom half of the grid. You can label benefits appearing in the lower left quadrant as "So What?" since they are not very important and the market is already satisfied. The lower right is basically "Petty Annoyances," needs that aren't satisfied but aren't very important either. In our case, if we were counting on Benefits B and C to bring us to the promised land, we had better make new travel plans.

The upper half of the grid reveals critical truth, however. Everything that

people think is important and with which they are already satisfied falls in the upper left hand quadrant.

These are “Requirements.” Your new product or service must match or offset these benefits just to enter the game. This is the “ante” for being a player. In this illustration, Benefit “A,” whatever it is, must be adequately met by your new product or service because it is so important. A competitor must be already meeting that need. So providing this benefit becomes a basic requirement of any new player in that market.

service delivers benefits that are important and not being satisfied by competitors, you have a real selling opportunity. The more items that show up in this quadrant the better. But if you have just one way up in the upper right hand corner, it may be enough to give you the competitive edge you’re looking for. In our illustration, focusing on Benefits “E” and “D” represent our best chances for success.

From a product perspective, you would be wise to find ways to better satisfy this revealed need, maybe

To create an advertising message, we would obviously choose “D” because most people are dissatisfied with the way existing products or services meet that need.

The Value Of A Simple Idea

How valuable can such a simple idea be? Well, how much money is wasted on choosing the wrong theme for an ad? How many false starts can a new product manager afford? Identifying the market’s true pulse early in the game is clearly worth a fortune.

What is your current method for sorting the winners from the losers? Properly employed, this simple technique can shorten new product introduction cycles from years to months, from months to weeks.

When you combine the reach of trade advertising with a message that effectively draws the market toward your new product or service, you can see why we call this simple research approach “lightning-in-a-bottle.”

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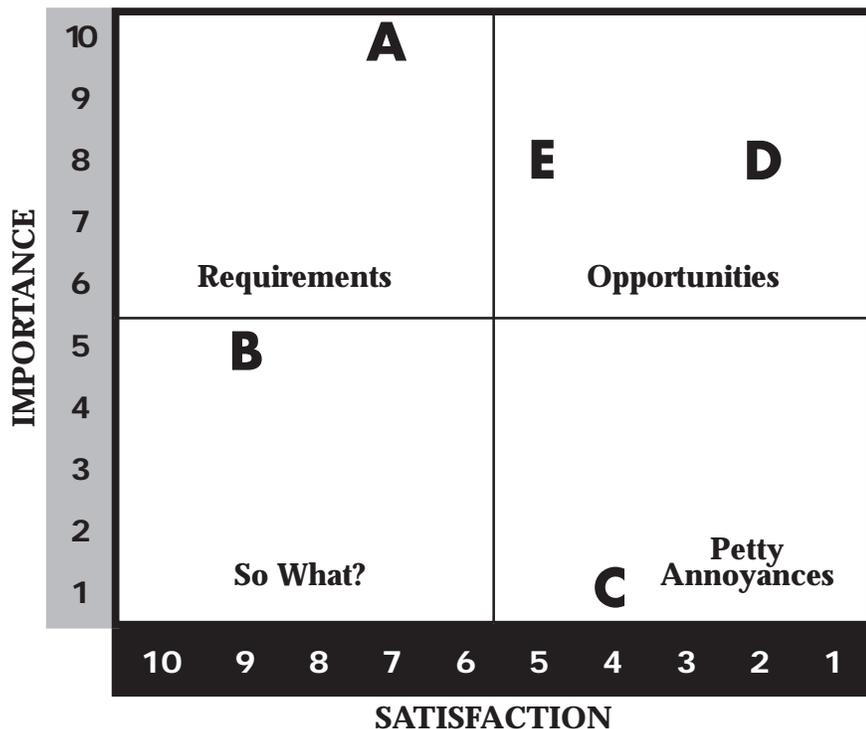
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Mark R. Nicolas brings a diversified background to helping businesses improve profitability. Through application of strategic planning skills and execution of national advertising and public relations activities, he has generated tens of thousands of inquiries for clients, as well as changed market perceptions.

Mr. Nicolas is a Partner in Gaul Advertising, Inc., an independent, full-service marketing communications agency founded in 1988. The firm currently has 34 clients and capitalized billings of \$4 million.



Lightning Strikes Twice

Now, at last, here’s your lightning in a bottle. The things people really want but are not getting fall in the upper right hand “Opportunity” quadrant. If your new product or

through design changes. At least now you have a clearer idea of where to put your efforts.

From an ad-making point of view, this grid becomes a terrific guide to develop the creative focus required for effective communication.

Are You Ready to Take Your Business to the Next Level?

Now you can enjoy the benefits of proven marketing communications savvy without the burden of dealing with large, impersonal agencies.

We provide “big agency” thinking for small and medium sized companies and organizations.

Call us to arrange a no obligation initial consultation on how intelligent marketing communications can help take your business to the next level.

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