

Without marketing, a great idea is a wink in the dark

 By [Chris Moerdyk](#): @chrismoerdyk

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Like most of my peers in the marketing industry, I get inventors and clever thinkers contacting me with something new they have developed.

Their stories are all the same: "We can't get any of the big stores to stock it," or "We can't find anyone to make it."

What they are finding out the hard way is that in business today the big idea is the easy part. Getting the consumer to buy something, however, takes a lot of marketing. And the more unique the product, the more marketing it needs. And the more unknown its brand name, the more marketing it needs. And marketing today costs a lot of money.

Scrapheap

The result is that hundreds of thousands of great product ideas end up on the scrapheap or gathering dust in the inventor's garage.

Just look at some extracts from an article I wrote 12 years ago, about some incredibly exciting products that won internationally acclaimed awards. I don't know about you, but I have not seen them around and can only come to the fairly confident conclusion that there just wasn't any money left for marketing.

And it is all fascinating stuff.

Take [Prof Joshua Silver's self-adjusting spectacles](#) for which he won the Edward de Bono medal for thinking. Now there's something for you. A medal for thinking. Every schoolboy's dream.

"Oi! Van Jaarsveld, what do you think you're doing...?"

"Thinking, sir..."

Thwack...!

Focus, focus

Anyway, Prof Silver's invention is based on the premise that one fifth of the world's population needs spectacles but doesn't have them, mostly because they simply can't afford them. The professor's challenge was to come up with a pair of glasses that didn't cost more than a few dollars and which almost anyone could put on and focus easily.

He came up with use-adaptive lenses that contained fluid-filled cells bounded by a thin elastic plastic membrane of optical quality. Changing the pressure of the fluid changes the power of the lenses. For the wearer, the process of adjusting the glasses is not very different to focusing a pair of binoculars.

The clue is in that line "...didn't cost more than a few dollars."

That's the biggest mistake made in product development. The cost of a product is not the money it takes to make it. Included in that cost must be a proportionate cost of distribution, packaging, the price paid to supermarkets for co-op advertising before they will stock anything, all other advertising, sales commissions etc ... all those elements of marketing that radically affect pricing.

And just as Prof Silver's adjustable glasses would have been be a boon for Africa's sight-impaired masses, so would [Jaron Lanier's Critical Mass Communicator](#) bring inexpensive, hassle-free communications to our continent.

Jaron Lanier of New York was a pioneer in the field of virtual reality and, in fact, it was Lanier who coined the term.

Cost a packet

His Critical Mass Communicator (CMC) is a human-powered, wireless, packet cellular communicator with speech recognition, synthesis and translation capabilities. Powered by a hand crank, a CMC seeks out other CMCs that are being simultaneously cranked. Each device contains a store of encrypted, low-power memory that holds a large number of packets waiting to find their way to recipients.

It looks like a bit like a telephone handset with a handle sticking out of the bottom. Watching someone using it would be like eavesdropping on a hirsute fellow frantically trying to shave the underside of his jaw with an electric razor.

Now here's an idea for my colleagues in the print media industry to ponder. Or, for that matter, anyone who is having difficulty dropping off on a Sunday afternoon kip. It is called [Univers Revolved from Ji Lee](#), New York, US, whom I suspect has a devious sense of humour.

It is an experimental typeface which probes the Western writing system to its very roots.

It produces, says Lee, "such a different shape you would not expect."

Not one for simple expressive English is our friend Lee.

De-mecha-what?

Anyway, Univers Revolved halts the reading process and de-mechanises [sic] it so as to draw attention to what we do when we read.

A meditation on the nature of language, alphabet, sight and dimension, Univers Revolved takes the Univers type font, a plain and widely used modern typeface, and places it in three dimensions. In this new system the letters are physical bodies that can be stacked on top of each other like building blocks or can form a circle and be read in any direction.

The toy-like character of the letters invites people to play with their elements and experiment with the innumerable ways in which they can be combined to form new words and meanings.

After which you will undoubtedly need some of Prof Silver's miracle glasses.

Anyway, the purpose of Univers Revolved is to make people rethink the alphabet and the experience of reading by challenging the reader's imagination with new shapes.

The big lesson one generally learns from failed new products is that when marketing is missing, so is success. There are exceptions, but these are extremely rare.

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Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdyk@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).
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