



# Beyond the Obvious

Killer Questions That Spark Game-Changing Innovation

by Phil McKinney  
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## Take-Aways

- Markets change so fast that companies must constantly innovate to stay competitive.
- Firms need to move beyond conventional ideas and traditional assumptions.
- Anyone can and should develop great new ideas; you can learn how to be innovative.
- Firms and individuals can follow a practical step-by-step system to increase innovation.
- Ask “Killer Questions” to reveal information that you might otherwise overlook.
- Put your best ideas to work by using “FIRE”: “Focus, Ideation, Ranking and Execution.”
- To move beyond conventional assumptions, adopt the viewpoint of a skeptical outsider.
- People who destroy new ideas are “corporate antibodies.”
- Learn to convince naysayers to support your innovative concepts.
- Creative individuals who consistently develop new ideas are always in demand.

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall

**8**

Applicability

**8**

Innovation

**8**

Style

**7**

## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How to use “Killer Questions” and the “FIRE” approach to develop great, innovative ideas; 2) How both can help your career and your company; and 3) How to thwart naysaying “corporate antibodies.”

### Recommendation

You can be as creative as Pablo Picasso or as innovative as Steve Jobs – or close – no matter who you are. Just follow the practical new-ideas system developed by “Innovation Guru” Phil McKinney, formerly a chief technology officer at Hewlett-Packard. His step-by-step innovation guidelines help you out-innovate your competitors, and develop new products and services. *getAbstract* finds his methods helpful for those competing in today’s “creative economy,” where great ideas are the hottest currency.

## Abstract

### Question Everything

To innovate, think about the world in new ways. Ask “Killer Questions” to uncover fresh information and insights that will enable your company to develop great ideas that others miss. Killer Questions let you take an unbiased outsider’s perspective by moving beyond your comfort zone and questioning everything about your company and its methods. Ask your customers and your prospects these three groups of Killer Questions, the “Who, What and How”:

#### 1. Who Are Your Customers and Prospects?

Do not assume that you know or can define your customers – who they are, what matters to them and what they want from the marketplace. Your clients’ motivations may surprise you. Effective marketers learn everything they can about potential and actual customers, including what criteria they apply to purchases. As you “explore, observe [and] ask,” investigate your standing with three different groups – your customers, potential customers and people who should buy your product but don’t – by asking these questions:

- **“Who is using my product in a way I never intended – and how?”** – You and your colleagues make tacit assumptions about why people buy your products and how they use them. But some customers may employ your products for applications you never considered. Discover what these are to find new opportunities to modify existing products, create new products or expand your markets.
- **“Who complains about my product?”** – Aggrieved customers take their gripes to social media sites, where you may learn more about your customer interface than any subordinate will tell you. Engage online with your complainers. Pay attention to their recommendations to improve your product or service and to regain customer goodwill.
- **“Who does not understand how to use my product because it has too few or too many features and functions?”** – Fewer features and less complexity can make certain products more attractive, not less. Ask your customers which 20% of your product’s features they use 80% of the time.
- **“What customer segment will emerge in five years that doesn’t exist today?”** – This question applies to the future buyers of your product. How are your customers

*“Generating and executing great ideas is the key to staying ahead in a rapidly changing world.”*

*“The supercharged pace of change and innovation means that what was true yesterday is already on its way to being outmoded today.”*

*“Corporate antibodies can stunt a company’s growth when they shut down the fresh ideas and unconventional thinkers it so badly needs.”*

*“The first step to successful ideation is to bring focus to the areas with the greatest opportunity.”*

*“Don’t make the mistake of assuming that ideas come from a certain person or department within your organization.”*

*“Nearly all great ideas require nerve, vision and guts to get in motion.”*

and the marketplace changing? Ask your existing clients to describe their future needs in all arenas, not only the ones you currently serve.

- **“What will future customers’ buying criteria be?”** – Purchasers of mobile phones once wanted their communication devices to be small and slim. Today, mobile phone users want large screens, which means larger mobile phones. Always be conscious of the cyclical nature of products and consumer preferences. Changes in lifestyles often indicate the end or beginning of product cycles.

## 2. What Do You Sell?

What are the core values of your products or services? Why do people buy what you sell? What do they like most about your commercial offerings? How will your products or services evolve? To be successful in the future, pose these questions:

- **“Could I create a standardized offering of a custom product?”** – Think about which of your customized products you could inexpensively convert to mass-market offerings. Or figure out how to lower the price of your bespoke product to expand your marketplace.
- **“How can I take advantage of emerging trends and fads?”** – Become an expert at uncovering “weak signals” emanating from obscure corners of your client base. These are needs that customers do not express directly, but that emerge in their buying trends or start to dominate the opinions expressed in blogs or lesser-known media outlets.
- **“How can I eliminate customer hassles and create unique benefits for customers?”** – If your customers anticipate an unpleasant interchange – such as a long wait while checking baggage for a flight – do whatever you can to reduce the downside of their experience. Even a tiny improvement will reap increased client loyalty.
- **“What features of my product create unanticipated passion?”** – When your customers bond emotionally with your product, it becomes a “must-have.” Discover what your consumers love, and incorporate that element into other products. Clients will pay a premium for must-haves.

## 3. How Does Your Firm Operate?

Marketing professionals don’t have much trouble asking the who and what questions, but these less-obvious how questions are equally critical. They uncover the value you give your customers:

- **“What industries are analogous to ours, and what can we learn from them?”** – All businesses strive to deliver products that buyers prefer over the competition’s version. Examine how firms in other industries solve this problem and learn from them.
- **“What would happen if I realigned my industry relationships?”** – Be prepared for any eventuality. After Japan’s tsunami, Shin-Etsu, the country’s dominant silicon wafer manufacturer, could not reopen its plant for five months. What backup plans do you have if something happens to your suppliers and supply lines?
- **“What are the criteria to select research and development projects?”** – Never base your innovation strategy entirely on return on investment. Develop one other fulcrum criterion – another pivotal qualifier – projects must meet before they can move forward.
- **“Where do we perform product research and development?”** – Balance your in-house and outsourced R&D. Outsourcing brings new attitudes, skill and knowledge.

*"A really good Killer Question will leave you surprised by the answer."*

*"The ability to form a question might be the key cognitive transition that separates apes, and all other beings, from mankind."*

*"Whether you are an insider or an outsider, you need to become the voice that challenges yesterday's answers."*

*"Knowing the old answers no longer impresses; having the ability to come up with the new answers does."*

- **"In what order do you do the R&D process?"** – Modern consumers regard design as important, not as an add-on. They want it to merge seamlessly with functionality. Consider revamping how you plan, design and develop your products.

## Innovation Killers

The innovation killers in your firm – those insidious “corporate antibodies” – respond to every new idea with a resounding no. Often these naysayers are older employees or have held one position for so long that they fear any change, and they see all innovation as a threat. Their typical objections, which always support the status quo, include, “We tried that before,” “Our customers like it this way” or “We can’t afford that.” Innovators must develop the skills to change those no’s to yes’s. Corporate antibodies’ reactions often fall into four categories:

1. **“The ego response”** – Typical objection: “I already thought of that a long time ago.” This is the “been there, done that” brush-off you’ll hear when your new plan challenges the position and self-image of corporate antibodies who consider themselves the most important idea people in your firm. Demonstrate that your new idea neither threatens their position nor attempts to supplant them. With reassurance, they’ll go along.
2. **“The fatigued response”** – Typical objection: “You’ll never get approval.” Burned-out corporate antibodies have tried and failed to get new plans off the ground so often that they have just surrendered. To shift them out of their defeatist posture, present your solution as a progression that the organization can handle in incremental steps.
3. **“The no-risk response”** – Typical objection: “Insufficient return on investment.” Corporate antibodies believe their conservatism protects the firm from impractical notions. To win their support, demonstrate that your initiative increases company profits. No-risk responders know that inaction rarely draws negative attention. Thus, they always want things to remain as they are. To counter, show that your idea poses little risk.
4. **“The comfort response”** – Typical objection: “Don’t rock the boat.” Try to show the naysayers that success takes many forms and objectives change over time. “Move your goal posts or persuade them to move theirs.”

## “The FIRE Method”

To maximize what you learn from Killer Questions, analyze the answers using the FIRE Method: “Focus, Ideation, Ranking and Execution.” This system will help you find and select the best ideas. Focus involves identifying the areas where you want to innovate: your consumers, services, prices, distribution, marketing, R&D, brand identity, and so on. Ideation calls for deploying the Killer Questions to discover great ideas. Ranking forces you to choose which new ideas hold the most creative promise. Ask five questions about each idea and grade the responses. Pursue the concepts with the best cumulative scores. The questions are:

1. How does this new idea improve your customer’s experience?
2. How does the idea alter your place in the market relative to your competition?
3. How does it affect the “financial structure of the industry?”
4. How can your company contribute to the world?
5. Can this new idea produce the profits that you need?

*"As long as you are actually getting out there, asking the Killer Questions, and generating ideas, you are on the right track."*

*"One of the biggest dangers of not having a way to identify and execute the best ideas is that weak ideas get selected and the results are disappointing."*

*"It's no longer about what you can do with your hands, but what you can come up with using your brain."*

*"Ideas without execution are a hobby."*

Execution makes idea generation meaningful. Use the "gated funding model" to move your proposed solution into the marketplace. Subject new ideas to sequential standards or progressive gates, to qualify for resources and funding. The four gates are:

1. **"Market validation"** – Confirm that your proposal satisfies a market need.
2. **"Customer validation"** – Test the idea by using mock-ups with actual customers.
3. **"Limited launch"** – Sell the actual product in a selected market.
4. **"Global launch"** – Widely market and distribute your new product.

### **"Innovation Workshops"**

To help your company benefit from the productivity of as many creative minds as possible, set up an innovation workshop to come up with new ideas. Follow six rules:

1. **"Set a focus"** – Multiple outlooks need one goal to be productive.
2. **"Assign two Killer Questions as homework"** – Provide questions two weeks before the workshop. Make sure everyone knows they must conduct fieldwork for answers.
3. **"Encourage investigation"** – Participants must query current customers in depth.
4. **"Don't filter"** – Urge participants to be alert to their usual assumptions.
5. **"Set a schedule for generating ideas and stick to it"** – Work with a time deadline and "stay on point."
6. **"Ranking isn't a dirty word"** – The most effective way to identify your best new ideas is to evaluate your concepts by comparing them to each other.

The point of all this examination is to pose new questions and to act on the fresh information you uncover. Like all invitations to change, these questions can be scary. But the firms that venture bravely in new directions will set the bar for everyone else and they'll open new markets first.

As millions of Chinese and Indian young people earn college degrees, they emerge into the workplace with the same knowledge that's available to educated professionals in industrialized nations. Alarming for such professionals, these hardworking members of emerging economies will sell their expertise more cheaply than employees in industrialized economies do. Information alone no longer possesses its former cachet; today, innovation is a prized currency. And those who think and function in new ways will be the most productive and sought-after innovators. "When it comes to innovation and ideas, nobody has ownership or control over you. Nobody can tell you that 'coming up with new ideas isn't part of your job description'."

Position your career with the understanding that, amid the marketplace's vast demand for innovation, just having knowledge and skills is no longer enough. To help your firm close its "innovation gap," you must ask inventive questions and offer new ideas. That will make you an "innovation evangelist" and a crucial employee in the "creative economy."

## **About the Author**

**Phil McKinney** is the former chief technology officer of Hewlett-Packard's Personal Systems Group, where he led strategic planning and R&D for the firm's PC product lines.