

What can we learn about Innovation and Marketing from the Fender Stratocaster?

If you're not a guitar nut, then some explanation is needed first. In the beginning there were basically two guitar makers, Gibson or Fender. Both make excellent guitars but Leo Fender revolutionized guitar playing by bending and breaking a few of the rules. He was responsible for introducing the Fender Stratocaster in 1954 – it has thrived fundamentally unchanged throughout 52 years of production. A favoured instrument of guitarists like Jimi Hendrix, Hank Marvin, Ritchie Blackmore, Mark Knopfler, Dave Gilmour, Eric Clapton. Life and music would never be the same again.....

Here's my old Stratocaster, the one IBM cremated after smashing it up at a Leadership Conference we held at a University in Cambridge – Burn Baby Burn!



Anyway on to business, the Stratocaster story illustrates a number of crucial principles about innovation and marketing that are widely applicable to business today. First, consider a few facts about Fender's Innovation:

Leo Fender was not a musician himself, but set out to build the best solid body electric guitar in the World. He pretty much succeeded. The main features and benefits of the design were:



An ergonomic design with forearm and tummy bevels (good for those beer bellies!) and an overall balance that made the guitar more comfortable to play. Stratocaster's looked futuristic and cool, unlike their contemporaries. The shape and overall design became what is known as a 'Dominant Design' in the world of Innovation. Many other designs have come along, but few have challenged Fender's intuitively right design.

Innovation and Marketing the Rock'n'Roll way



A "drop-in" pickguard and pickup assembly that made the Stratocaster substantially easier to mass produce, repair, and customize. Even if you have set light to it!



A bolt-on neck that was less expensive to manufacture. The necks of one-piece guitars sometimes warped. This meant that you had to throw the whole instrument away. If you left your Stratocaster next to the radiator, you simply had to buy a new neck.



The ability to produce new sounds not possible with other instruments, which in part inspired new musical genres like Surf and Hendrix-style psychedelia. Here's a picture of me busking with John Otway after I reconstructed the guitar.

Crucially, Fender introduced a number of features which were intuitively right – such as the five way pickup switch – preferring to go with his intuition rather than to use market research, which cannot tell you about things that have not yet been invented.

In terms of innovation and design, a hallmark of good design is the introduction of features that actually offer benefits rather than design for its own sake. Most of Fender's design innovations actually achieved this ambition, which may account in part for the Stratocaster's continuing popularity.

Fender was extremely skilful in marketing the Stratocaster, but that's another story for another time...

We offer engaging seminars on product and service innovation and marketing, drawing from a wide variety of examples and ensuring that the lessons are transferable to your business. *Why not book us for your next conference, event or company seminar?*

Have a look at www.fender.com for more examples of this famous instrument.