

VU JA DE—SEE OLD THINGS IN NEW WAYS

‘The question is not what you look at , but what you see’----HENRY DAVID THOREAU.

Young executives can draw much insight into the art of innovative thinking from this Thoreau wisdom.

In World War II, British and US air forces faced a rising number of their planes being either destroyed or having to hastily abandon their missions in the face of enemy fire , with the returning planes badly damaged. A group of scientists was entrusted with the task of advising where to put armor and strengthen the planes. This group closely examined the damaged planes and was about to recommend a ‘solution’ when a young statistician Abraham Wald thought about the planes that **did not return!** Wald put a mark on every bullet hole in the planes that returned from battle .He found that two major sections of the fuselage –one between the wings and the other between the tails –had fewer bullet holes. He decided to put the armor in these places, where he saw fewer **not more** holes. Why?The planes he analyzed had not been shot down! So it was the holes he was not seeing----in the planes that were **not returning**—that needed extra protection- a new way to look at old things.

De Ja Vu, is the feeling that you have had an experience before even though it is brand new. **Vu ja de** a term coined by author Robert Sutton, is what happens when you feel and act as if an experience or an object is brand new even if you have had it or seen it hundreds of times. In situations where innovative thinking is required it pays to have a **vu ja de** attitude. It helps us to see the same old things in a new way as the example of Wald shows.

Some people are born with this mentality but all of us can cultivate it. **Vu ja de** can be a cultural characteristic of Companies and Groups too.

Ettore Sottsass is a world renowned Italian designer. Even at 80 he retains the **vu ja de** approach. His firm takes a radical approach to designing anything at all—from Olivetti typewriters to telephone directories, to a resort in China. For example he and his team designed the commercially successful ‘Valentine’ typewriter in 1969 that was the colour of bright red lipstick. His approach was that while most designs are meant to be bland, rational, functional and not noticeable, the things we use should provoke strong feelings

Speed is the modern mantra—fast food, quick fixes, fast life, rapid action are everyday terminology. **But there is a creative genius who believes that**

when you look at things more slowly than everyone else does, the same old things look different to you and you can think about them in different ways. Joey Reiman rejects the assumption that faster is better. He tells his clients—Coca-Cola, for example—that he would generate creative ideas for them at the speed of molasses! He openly advertises that his is the slowest company anyone could meet. He bases this philosophy on his understanding that most advertising firms are in a rush to be ‘creative’ and deliver results to multiple clients and this, according to him, stifles creativity. Reiman and his team ever so slowly developed a most unusual marketing positioning for their client, Coty Inc. a top fragrance giant. Reiman created a unique positioning of a ‘ghost myst’ the first perfume to embrace values and spirituality-inner beauty rather than physical beauty. ‘Ghost myst’ became the best selling perfume in 1995 and in fact launched a ‘spirituality in beauty’ movement that many other companies copied. Reiman’s competitive advantage is that his firm is a tortoise in a world filled with speedy hares.

Vu ja de also involves

- shifting our opinions and perceptions in any which way—is it likely that the poor have more children because they are poor?.
- shifting our focus from objects or patterns that are in the foreground to those in the background—can terrorism be better tackled by looking into the problems of the families of the terrorists?
- thinking of things that are usually assumed to be negative as positive and vice versa—is it not more pertinent to consider our mass of poor people as a major business opportunity?.
- reversing assumptions about cause and effect or what matters most versus least—is slack consumer demand fuelled by redundancies or are redundancies fuelled by slack demand or both fuelled by other forces?

In creativity ignorance is bliss, especially in the early stages of the ideation process. Involving ignorant people in an exercise ensures that they are not conditioned by the baggage of ‘knowledge’ and are able to see the same old things in new ways.. A company would do well to hire novices to come up with creative ideas for problems. The most famous case of a novice being brought in and going on to become an internationally renowned expert is that of Jane Goodall. Anthropologist Louis Leakey hired Goodall to do two years of intense observations of apes in Africa. Goodall hesitated because she had no scientific training but Leakey insisted that not only was a university degree not necessary but it had serious drawbacks! Goodall realised that he wanted someone with a mind uncluttered and unbiased by

theory who would take up the study for no other reason than a real desire for knowledge. The rest is history as Goodall shocked and awed the world with her pathbreaking revelations of the apes and their behaviour that forever changed the way we view these animals. The other ways of promoting *vu ja de* is to hire people who have formal training in some area but are not jaded by the historical and arbitrary and outdated customs in the industry. Dyson Appliances of UK, the makers of the largest selling vacuum cleaners, is a case in point. CEO Dyson believes that his company's success could be attributed to hiring fresh graduates –unsullied by ‘experience’.

When Daniel Ng an American trained engineer opened Hongkong's first McDonald's in 1975, his local food industry competitors dismissed the venture as a non-starter. ‘Selling hamburgers to the Cantonese? You must be joking!’. Ng credits his boldness to the fact that he did not have an MBA and had never taken a business course-- quoted by James Watson, Professor of Chinese Studies, reporting that McDonald now has 158 thriving restaurants in Hongkong!

THE AUTHOR K .R.RAVI IS A MUMBAI BASED CORPORATE TRAINER AND SOUTH ASIA'S FIRST DR. EDWARD DE BONO CERTIFIED PUBLIC TRAINER IN LATERAL THINKING . HE CAN BE CONTACTED AT createravi@hotmail.com