



## Building a Better Mousetrap

By Michael DeCata



Innovation doesn't start with an idea. It starts with a problem.

It might be hacksaw blades that shatter dangerously when they break. Or it could be grease removers not aggressive enough for industrial grime. Over the years, I've seen many innovative new products emerge this way: A customer is seeking a product that meets specific needs or tolerances, but it does not yet exist. Those that we have in the warehouse are not getting the job done.

The challenge can seem overwhelming in its simplicity. How do you build a better mousetrap when the mousetrap has been around forever? The secret is to truly understand the customer's challenges.

Let's take the development of our Mechanic's Length Drill Bit.

Customers were coming to our sales reps with a problem. They needed a drill bit that could withstand abuse as they were often working in confined spaces and out of position, laying on their backs or crawling under machinery. With the proliferation of portable battery powered drill motors, they could not apply enough tightening pressure to secure the drill bit and keep the rounded shanks from slipping in the keyless drill chuck.

Our first call was to our strategic suppliers to see if they had a product that would solve the problem, but we were unsuccessful. So, we needed to design and develop something new.

Brainstorming, we came up with the idea of changing the drill bit's shank from round to a three-flat design, which creates edges the drill chuck can grab. We then shortened the overall length to give more clearance. It involved trials, tweaks, failures and plenty of back and forth. Eventually, though, we designed a superior product. The bits were easier to work with, less pressure was required to secure them in the chuck, they could be used in tight quarters, and they didn't shatter or break.

We have innovated many new products using a very similar process and found it valuable to keep the following points in mind:

- Start with a problem, not a product. We ask our sales reps to tell us every time a customer uses a tool or part that doesn't work quite right for them. Does it break? Fail to perform as needed? Leak? With this information, we assess the problem to see how it can be solved.
- Approach suppliers with real data. We reassure them that we know how their products are used in the field. When we provide them with a plan for how to make their products perform better under real-world circumstances, we're providing a service.

The most important lesson, of course, is that, with the right approach, it is possible to build a better mousetrap. I've seen it done time after time. Understanding how your customers use products is the most important step, because innovation is born from solving real, everyday problems faced in the field.

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