

CIRAS' Ideation Session Energizes Decker to Develop Innovative New Products and Services

Decker Plastics is on a mission to develop proprietary products, according to company president Mike Decker. "We want to grow revenues and grow profits," he says. "To do that you have to be innovative in developing new products and new services. In business you're either growing or dying a slow death."

The Council Bluffs company, established in 1955 and currently employing approximately 25 people, manufactures plastics primarily for the food industry. Bob Decker, Mike's father, serves as CEO of the business, which the family acquired in 2000.

Following their attendance at an Internet marketing strategy workshop a year ago, the Deckers met with CIRAS project manager Paul Gormley to discuss innovation and how to develop a system that nurtures idea generation and ultimately leads to developing new products and services.

"People aren't born innovative," Gormley says. "It is work for most of us. Some people allow themselves to be innovative and don't mind when someone says that's a little crazy, but most of us have to challenge ourselves to think beyond total practicality. We have to allow ourselves to look outside the norm because that's where innovation comes from."

Gormley leads ideation workshops called CREATE sessions to help businesses generate ideas for new products, services, processes, business models, and marketing messages.

A CREATE session was held for Decker Plastics at an off-site location in December of 2012. The session included members of the management team as well as representatives of their sister company, Decker Sports. In addition, Gormley brought in CIRAS project managers Brenda Martin and Shankar Srinivasan to serve as catalysts for the session.

"Brenda really understands the requirements and opportunities in the food industry, while Shankar's expertise



is in polymer processing—that is, plastics," Gormley explains. "I wanted to see if they could come in and shake up a group that understood only a certain level of both. I wanted to see how the Decker team and the catalysts would interact with each other."

The result was very positive, according to Mike Decker. "Brenda and Shankar brought their real-world experiences as well as their educational expertise to the table, which was very insightful and helpful," he explains. "They are not emotionally connected to our business, which allowed them to be objective. They highlighted the customer needs and emphasized what food companies and food processors are looking for in terms of quality control and new products or services."

In his work with companies, Gormley focuses on innovation being a team effort. Oftentimes, he points out, companies get mired in the day-to-day-operation of the business. Each person has their assigned duties, such as engineer, marketer, and accountant, and they essentially work in silos. No one picks up the role of being the person that helps all of these people work together and be the entrepreneurs that initially helped the business get started.

"We're trying to help companies build that entrepreneurial spirit, give them ways to innovate together," Gormley says. "No one team or person is responsible for everything."

With the completion of the CREATE session, Decker Plastics has begun the process of developing a strategy for continuous innovation with ongoing assistance from CIRAS.

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