



# Resisting temptation: the other kind of IP

## Innovation is not the only thing we should look for and appreciate on our store shelves

Innovation pervades, and for the most part (with the possible exception of spam and telemarketing) largely improves, virtually every aspect of our day-to-day lives. So there is also a temptation (there always seems to be a temptation), in our technology-driven society, to think in terms of technology innovations. Especially in my line of work: innovation and its commercialisation. And – *mea culpa* – I recently gave into temptation. It was not so much the guilty pleasure that this suggests, and in the end I did get caught. But the good news is that I caught myself in the act and, as all good sinners do, I learned my lesson. Let me explain.

### Analysis paralysis

I recently made a little shopping trip to my local Target store, which sells everything from toothpaste to the latest consumer electronics. I had the most immediate interest in the latter, but the most immediate need for the former. So off to the toothpaste aisle I went, only to be confronted by a dizzying array of brands, flavours and formulations. I am generally a well-educated shopper in service of making the best choices for health and quality of life – as are we all, no doubt. I will confess, however, to being overwhelmed by the myriad – and frankly barely distinguishable – options spreading out before me in the two full aisles of dental products.

I finally honed in on a family of Crest toothpastes – the 3D White Luxe line – that possessed the desired qualities. ‘White’ seemed like a no-brainer – teeth should be white, after all. ‘Luxe’ – well, what’s not to like about anything luxe? Admittedly, I could not quite figure out what ‘3D’ had to do with my teeth, but I was willing to let that one go. I focused instead on choosing one of the three versions of that toothpaste family.

Each package had a colourful, shiny banner indicating the type: “Glamorous

White”, “Enamel Renewal” or “Lustrous Shine”. But which suited me best? I work in innovation. Exciting, yes, but not exactly the most glamorous vocation, so perhaps I should opt for the Glamorous White to amp up my glam factor? Then again, glamorous or not, I would really like my teeth be around for a while, so a little Enamel Renewal might be in order.

Paralysed by indecision, I stood in the aisle cogitating on the options. As I did so, first one shopper, then another darted in front of me, snatching their choice from the shelf without hesitation. I envied their rapid selection, and frankly the electronics department was already calling out to me, but by this point I had too much invested and was determined to make a well-considered choice. I probed deeper.

Printed smaller, but in equally shiny letters, each banner held out the promise of a different benefit, such as “shinier smile in one day” and “whiter teeth in one week”. So, it takes seven times as long to get your teeth white as it does to get them shiny, I thought. Finally, it seemed that I was making some progress. The whitening technology is clearly more powerful – seven times so – than the shine technology. Lustrous Shine was out. Now it was a duel between Glamorous White and Enamel Renewal. But how to decide? I had run out of small print on the front of the package. I needed to know what I was trading off between them. So I then did what I usually do in the first instance: turn over the package to read the list of ingredients.

As I made my way through the litany of polysyllabic, unpronounceable ingredients, my spirits buoyed. More than halfway through the list and all the ingredients were the same. I would not be missing too much after all, regardless of which I chose. My growing satisfaction, however, was short-lived. And as I reached the end of the list, it promptly turned to disappointment. I realised that all of the ingredients were exactly the same, and in exactly the same order (which, by convention, indicates their relative amounts). The difference, it would seem, was not in the package – it was on the package! And only there.

## Dystopian future or little epiphany?

This is truly a triumph of appearance over substance. But is it a pyrrhic victory? Is this a portent of a dystopian future where innovation vanishes from the store shelves? I think not. There is no tragedy here in the making. It is more of a realisation – that lesson I mentioned earlier.

For many of us who work in innovation, while there is a recognition of the market side of the equation, deep down there is also the belief (or perhaps hope) that new technology drives market adoption and marketing simply facilitates the inevitable. As a child, I marvelled at how technology shapes our world and brings us – quite literally – to new ones, like Mars. As an adult (and here as a consumer), I have grown to appreciate how powerfully marketing can influence perception, and that it too has the power to shape not just our choices, but our world as well. From time to time, we all need a little epiphany like mine to remind us of what we already know. The only potential tragedy is to rely too heavily, or exclusively, on either technology push or the kind of market push that I recounted here. The best and most enduring products embrace both market content and technology content. Lesson learned.

Oh, and for anyone still wondering which toothpaste I bought... I just closed my eyes and grabbed one at random: as it turns out, a truly educated choice.

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