

Posted December 23, 2007

Former Kimberly-Clark exec leading innovation



[Multimedia](#)

[Cheryl Perkins, president of her own firm, Innovationedge, Neenah, describes the process of "open innovation."](#)

Cheryl Perkins reinvents how firms plan their futures

By [Pete Bach](#)

Post-Crescent staff writer

NEENAH — Every business fears the 500-pound gorilla, the mythical ogre in the shadows that surely will wreak corporate havoc if let loose.

But what if that gorilla weighs 150 pounds, slips in unnoticed, behaves a lot like staff and yet threatens to disrupt sales and profits in a workplace preoccupied with production deadlines?

Cheryl Perkins' feisty new company is all about trying to recognize and rein in the smaller interloper. Like the rambunctious gorilla, her firm thrives on not only countering the threat, but teaching corporations ways to leap ahead of the monster by transforming good ideas into breakthrough products.

"You have to focus on what's going on around you and outside you. And you have to look for competitive threats," said Perkins, founder and president of Innovationedge.

Thinking differently

Coming up on its first year in operation, Innovationedge boasts 30 different clients, both companies and inventors, and a global scope that takes in Russia, the Middle East and Europe.

Perkins christened her company Innovationedge — read "leading edge" — because it champions some wide-ranging concepts and ideas for ways to take a product to market.

"There's lots of ideas. But how do you take that idea and how do you take the insights and trends and convert it to a winning business proposition so it generates profit? A lot of that is what we do," said Perkins.

Perkins formed her new company fully grounded in the nuances of innovation. It was her crowning moment in a 22-year career with Kimberly-Clark Corp., where she rose to become the chief innovation officer before resigning in late 2006 to pursue her own enterprise.

Perkins recruited some experienced hands away from her company after she parted ways with K-C — with which her firm continues to deal — and has wasted no time flying good people all over the globe to drum up business.

One is Jeff Lindsay, a registered U.S. patents agent with 93 granted patents under his belt and many more pending. Lindsay recently returned from a trip to Russia with a host of ideas to go with the delectable candy that his hosts showered on him.

He attended a biotechnology conference, a step in the due diligence process so necessary to building partnerships that can hasten new products to market.

"Innovation is all about making something actually happen," said Lindsay, director of solution development for Innovationedge.

"Many times inventors shoot themselves in the foot," Lindsay said. "Not only is it harmful to go to the wrong company in the wrong order, or the wrong market at the wrong time, many of the inventors — even when they pick the right company at the right time, by chance usually — they still can mess up by going to the wrong people in that company."

One of Perkins' bywords is open innovation, a means of leveraging expertise outside the company in a process with many more advantages than disadvantages. As she put it: "The 'what' of the solution is more important than 'where' it comes from."

Innovationedge also gets its clients thinking about so-called disruptive innovations, which, in short, defy the steady progression of incremental product improvement. They entail an introduction of seemingly inferior products that eventually leap ahead of the competition.

"A disruptive innovation is one that is kind of off the curve and will look like it's worse, like it's not going after the mainstream consumers at least initially of the incumbents," Lindsay said. "But it gets a foothold. This worse innovation typically offers new dimensions of convenience, portability and is easier to use. Like a laptop computer versus a mainframe."

Whatever it takes

Roy Luebke, director of capability development for Innovationedge, has been making regular jaunts back and forth to the corporate headquarters of WD-40 in San Diego, Calif. His aim? To help the consumer products company whose namesake spray lubricant is known around the world with its growth strategy.

Needless to say, WD-40 is about much more these days than a product that silences squeaky door hinges.

The company wants to refine its approach to the marketplace and that where Luebke and Perkins' team come in: helping it discover ways to do that.

WD-40 spokeswoman Stephanie Barry said the company has had many successes but is ready to take a leap forward. She met Perkins after she was named among the top 25 champions of innovation by Business Week magazine. "I quickly realized Cheryl's capabilities were what we needed," she said.

WD-40 intends to accomplish a two-year process in one year.

"It's a big change, and the company's in the early stages," Barry said.

The firm wants to look at a broader spectrum: which brands, and which projects are going to take priority. And more.

"Cheryl has a unique way to accomplish that roadmap," said Barry. "And then, within that, (to say) here's how you prioritize which projects you'll work on (at) which times."

Pete Bach: 920-993-1000, ext. 430, or pbach@postcrescent.com

Partnership leads to Webinar series

NEENAH — Innovationedge will partner with London-based Pure Insight and become the sole U.S. company to host Web-based seminars, or Webinars, for innovation-hungry professionals.

The tutorials will enable corporate leaders, inventors and entrepreneurs to access the most current innovation Best Practices around the clock right from their computers.

"Webinars allow us to provide innovation insights when and how they are needed while saving time, money and travel," said Cheryl Perkins, founder and president of Neenah-based Innovationedge.

The regularly scheduled Webinars will feature insider insights from more than two dozen, leading industry practitioners annually.

Topics will range from opportunity identification through open innovation, portfolio management and evaluation of strategic options.