



Getting to the Root of Innovation

By Rich Youmans

"Learning is what most adults will do for a living in the 21st century."

—Lewis Perelman

The concept was simple: assemble a panel of renowned bench jewelers—in this case, Charles Lewton-Brain, Jurgen Maerz, Alan Revere, Brad Simon, and Kate Wolf—and challenge them to present 60 bench tips in 60 minutes. Tips would pop like a string of firecrackers, one after another, generating both excitement and inspiration.

It was a great idea, and it turned into a rollicking panel discussion at the recent Clasp conference produced by Rio Grande. Those five jewelers (all of whom have contributed to *MJSA Journal*) delivered a series of bench tricks that had attendees scribbling notes furiously. There was no shortage of ideas—but what struck me most was an observation that led not to an idea, but to an insight into the roots of innovation.

It occurred midway through the presentation, after several rounds of tips had been offered. Brad Simon was explaining how bamboo skewers can be used with a flex-shaft to polish tiny areas (they fit quick-change handpieces much better than do toothpicks, a more traditional way to get into small spaces). As Brad ended, the audience turned expectantly in the direction of the next presenter, Alan Revere.

Alan?

"Hold on," he said, scribbling intently. "I just want to write that one down." He looked up, a bright smile on his face. "That's a great tip!"

And that's when it struck me. Here was Alan Revere, an accomplished jeweler, educator, and author, someone others look to for guidance and inspiration. He was sitting on this panel, an acknowledged expert in his field—yet, rather than simply offering up his ideas and basking in the glow of an attentive audience, he wanted to learn as well. Indeed, he was visibly excited to have encountered an unfamiliar bench tip, one that he could add to his own arsenal.

It reminded me of a similar experience I had had at the Krafwerk's seminar series

produced by Precious Metals West/Fine Gold every year. That event, too, has featured some of the best jewelers in the industry, including many of the people who sat on that Clasp panel. And what impressed me most was how these jewelers would attend one another's seminars, even asking to have their own sessions rescheduled to ensure they could attend a specific presentation. I distinctly remember Charles Lewton-Brain going from session to session at one Krafwerks and taking copious notes; even though he was one of the presenters, it would be fair to say that he took away as many new ideas as any of the attendees.

Watching Alan Revere do the same thing, it struck me that people such as Charles and Alan, acknowledged experts and innovators, were recognized as such because they *never stopped learning*. They devoured information, not because they had to, but because they wanted to. And that constant desire to learn is at the root of innovation.

Learning to Innovate

For the past two years, this magazine has focused a great deal on the shifting landscape of the global market, the challenges facing the jewelry industry, and the ways in which innovative practices can help to meet those challenges. As many business analysts have noted, in a world in which China and India have become new powers in low-cost manufacturing, and in which Wal-Mart has set the standard for discounted prices, any U.S. manufacturer or independent retailer hoping to compete in a price war will soon find itself out of business.

Companies must focus on innovation to create new, value-added products with higher margins, yet product innovation alone is no panacea. During discussions held with the MJSA Innovation Advisory Council (the members of which are listed

on page 14), the point was made repeatedly that new products would go nowhere if companies hadn't mastered sound business practices. Companies that can't make quality goods, that don't know how to determine the best technologies for their

needs (and then take maximum advantage of those capabilities), that can't market themselves effectively, deliver product efficiently, or create customer loyalty—those companies will undoubtedly be among the 21st century's first casualties.

The MJSA Innovation Initiative

When MJSA established its Innovation Initiative two years ago, our goal was twofold: to celebrate innovation in all of its forms, and to spur on the pursuit of innovation throughout the industry.

For the first goal, the centerpiece of our efforts has been the annual Innovation Awards, which are announced every December in the magazine and presented at the following Expo New York (which this year will take place March 18-20 at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center). This year's winners once again show how companies are creating new, improved spins on some of the industry's most common practices, from ring sizing to lost-wax casting.

To accomplish that second goal—to spur on the pursuit of innovation—we've published a number of articles in the magazine that aim to help companies create and nurture a culture of innovation.

We've also extended those efforts to educational events. The most notable of these was last year's "Thinking Ahead: The CAD/CAM Experience" at MJSA Expo New York. This three-hour session showcased leading CAD/CAM systems and enabled attendees to watch designs being created, to see how those designs can be transformed into models, and to talk to vendors and users alike to help determine which system would be right for their needs. Since the pursuit of innovation requires that companies become familiar with the latest technologies, this virtual "open house" provided them with the perfect opportunity to do just that.

These efforts will continue in the coming year. The 2007 MJSA Expo New York, for example, will feature not only an Innovation Area on the show floor, where MJSA Innovation Award winners past and present will demonstrate their products, but also a Technology Day on Tuesday, March 20: For four hours, Expo buyers will find an "open house" for not only CAD/CAM systems, but also bonding technologies, from high-tech welding systems to the latest lasers.

We also plan to incorporate innovation (as well as sound business practices) among the topics at the various seminars we'll produce in 2007 for other trade shows, including JA New York and JCK Las Vegas. And, of course, we will continue to promote those same topics in every issue of *MJSA Journal*. Consider it our "lifelong" goal: to provide you with as many opportunities as possible to continue your learning, and to develop an innovative mindset so that you enhance and expand your business—and ultimately succeed in this new global economy.

Companies that succeed will do all of those things—and incorporate innovation into their mindset. They'll learn to look at how they've always done things, and discover ways of doing them better. They won't be afraid to ask questions, to challenge assumptions, or to unlock the creative capabilities of their entire staff. They'll recognize that the process never ends—that today's innovation is tomorrow's standard practice. They will commit themselves to championing the new in all aspects of their operations, from product development to operational logistics to marketing and sales. In short, they will dedicate themselves to an endless pursuit of knowledge—or, to use a more current term, to "lifelong learning."

Over the past several years, the idea of lifelong learning has been touted by everyone from Peter Senge (whose book *The Fifth Discipline* promoted the idea of the "learning organization") to Thomas Friedman, who points to continuous learning as one of the "muscles" workers need to remain employable in today's "flat" world. The late Steven Kretzmer, whom MJSA is honoring this year with its first lifetime achievement award for innovation (see page 16), was, not surprisingly, a great proponent of this philosophy.

"Knowledge is power," Steven once told me many years ago. He could create stunning designs that in themselves were not innovative. But when he developed new alloys for those designs, and created tension settings to showcase their gemstones—that was innovative. He learned about the metallurgical properties of spe-

cific alloys, then used that knowledge for his own ends. And he had fun doing it—at one Designer Day symposium, he exhorted those in attendance to explore, to create, "to have fun." I can only imagine that on the day when he perfected a method of creating "levitating" jewelry with Polarium, the smile on his face was as bright as—well, the smile on Alan Revere's face when he discovered a new use for bamboo skewers.

Such is the power, and joy, of learning. The trick, of course, is to extend the pursuit of learning throughout an entire

organization. Jim Collins, the business guru famed for such books as *Good to Great* and *Build to Last*, once wrote an article called "The Learning Executive." In it, he described how the true "learning person" never misses an opportunity to extend his or her knowledge. He offered Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton as an example:

Companies that succeed will incorporate innovation into their mindset. They'll learn to look at how they've always done things, and discover ways of doing them better.

"Walton viewed himself not as a definitive expert on retailing but as a lifelong student of his craft, always asking questions and taking every opportunity to learn. A Brazilian businessman once told [Collins] that of ten U.S. retailing CEOs he wrote to asking for an appointment after he'd purchased a discount retailing chain in South America, only Walton said yes. 'We didn't know much about retailing, so we wanted to talk to executives who knew that business,' he explained. 'Most didn't bother to reply. Sam said, 'Sure, come on up.' Only later did I realize he was as interested in learning from us as we were in learning from him; he pummeled us with questions about Brazil. Later, we launched a joint venture with Wal-Mart in South America.'"

Collins goes on to recommend that companies set not only productivity goals, but also learning goals. They could even keep learning logs; employees could have weekly "to learn" lists, much as they have "to do" lists. The more that learning becomes a part of a company's culture, the more knowledgeable its employees will become.

And knowledge, properly tapped, turns into ideas—and innovations. ♦

MJSA Innovation Advisory Council

Eddie Bell, *Neutec USA; Santa Fe Symposium*

Jim Binnion, *James Binnion Metal Arts LLC*

Michael Bondanza, *Michael Bondanza Inc.*

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Cindy Edelstein, *Jeweler's Resource Bureau*

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Blaine Lewis, *New Approach School for Jewelers*

Charles Lewton-Brain, *Brain Press*

Jurgen Maerz, *Platinum Guild International*

Ajit Menon, *United Precious Metal Refining*

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