



New product launches are critical to your company's long-term health.

Today's customers look for innovation. They expect it.

It's an essential component of any company's growth strategy. To solve customer pain points, or a problem they never knew existed, innovation has to be part of any human-centric vision.

But how you innovate could be the difference between continual profitability and wasted investment.

Innovative products call for an innovative approach.

Launching a new product is a challenge no matter what industry you're in. Both before you get to market, and after. There's a lot to consider in setting yourself up for success.

"Getting the product right starts with putting the right people in place to drive development and marketing," says Dr. Ernest Cavin, CEO/President of Haag-Streit USA/Reliance Medical Products, a leading manufacturer of ophthalmic equipment. "And they're not always going to come from within your own company."

Choosing the right partners.

To keep new products in the pipeline, and maintain success, it's important to choose innovation and creative partners carefully.

"Establishing long-term relationships with innovation and creative partners can be a game-changer," Dr. Cavin says. "Trusted experts who are constantly questioning the status quo will regularly monitor the market and consistently bring you new ideas and solutions."

Dr. Cavin cites Reliance Medical's relationship with Zukun Plan, an Ohio product design studio, as an example. Reliance had partnered with Zukun Plan to create the Premiere Collection, a retail-and spa-inspired line of exam chairs.



With the success of the new line, Dr. Cavin invited Zukun Plan to propose an on-going program to drive the development of new Reliance products. The program was coined Project Jumpstart.

"When Dr. Cavin presented us with this opportunity, the Reliance brand was at a critical moment in its corporate timeline," said Zukun Plan owner Terry Birchler. "For decades, it has been a top-notch brand - a reputation built on rock-solid engineering and build quality. Reliance makes other brands look flimsy. The trouble is, how long can this reputation sustain sales of a product line frozen in time?"

Is there a successful case study of a product remaining virtually unchanged indefinitely? And, if not, when would be the critical moment to move forward?

"My answer to these questions: there are plenty of examples of once rock-solid brands that dissolved because they didn't evolve: Kodak, Blockbuster, and Nokia, to name a few," Birchler said. "We knew we had to start preparing the Reliance brand for the future."

Accelerating Speed-to-Market

Working with an experienced, trusted partner, such as Zukun Plan, Dr. Cavin says, can help you avoid much of the “culture failure” that can derail and delay innovation and new product launches, including insufficient marketing research, technical problems and bad timing.

This is critical, he says, as the ability to quickly respond to customers’ needs and changing markets is the new competitive advantage.

- Speed yields higher profitability, as revenue from sales of new products is realized earlier.
- Speed can mean fewer surprises – if you stick with the product as it was originally conceived, it is more likely to meet market requirements.
- Speed to market that’s too fast, however, can often lead to failure. Rushing a product through the process, and cutting corners, often result in disasters.

“Once our partnership with Zukun Plan was established, I invited them to engage on one of our most important initiatives, which we were calling The Lane of the Future,” Dr. Cavin says. “The project was still in its infant stages, but I saw that handing the reins to Zukun would clear the path to a successful launch.”

Know your market. Know their pain points. Sometimes, literal pain points.

The art of determining strategic direction and tactics for new products is a question of identifying and selecting strategic arenas. That means meticulous research to uncover crucial customer and market insights.

“Research leads to planning and planning is everything – just like planning for a vacation, it makes everything go more smoothly,” Dr. Cavin says. In the case of The Lane of the Future, Zukun Plan dug deep.

Zukun Plan set off on an extensive discovery phase, engaging key opinion leaders, dealers, and independent doctors/ patients who had no relationship with Reliance. They further studied innovations and trends in ophthalmic medicine as well as general medical products.

Many users shared glowing reviews of existing Reliance products, but Zukun Plan pressed for ways to improve, steering the conversation towards what wasn’t working. A list materialized, covering patient discomfort (physical and emotional), doctor ergonomics, speed of work, burnout, and a need to fully revamp the use of technology.

The result of the push for more candid answers? Real clarity. “We saw that the market had truly not evolved in 20-30 years, and where our strategy needed to focus,” said Birchler.



Taking the guardrails off.

A critical area of development, and where many companies fail, is turning mounds of impressive research into an equally impressive product concept. For Zukun Plan, that challenge was made all the easier by Dr. Cavin’s hands-off approach.

“Dr. Cavin empowered us with the latitude to work outside of legacy thinking,” said Birchler. “He facilitated a team uncoupled from any connection to Reliance’s usual way of engineering and development.”

“Great ideas die because of ego,” Dr. Cavin says. “If you trust your own decision-making, you have to trust the partners you choose.”

Zukun Plan began powering through concepts and possible directions for the new new human-centric, ergonomically optimized lane for Reliance to consider. Typically, Birchler notes, corporate customers - the higher ups in particular - have personal preferences to inject at this point.

But Dr. Cavin was not typical.

“I am not the design talent,” he told Zukun Plan. “You are the professionals, you are the experts, you should tell me what is best.”

Zukun Plan found Dr. Cavin’s input refreshing and empowering. At the same time, it raised the stakes for Zukun to take responsibility and deliver. “The freedom he afforded Zukun Plan was not aimless meandering,” Birchler said. “Dr. Cavin stayed involved, expected results, and constantly demanded progress toward a bottom line success.”

Showtime.

Innovation is never ending. And it can be difficult for innovators to declare a product “ready”. Art, as they say, is never finished, only abandoned. But that’s what launch dates are for. And working with experienced pros exponentially increases your chances of hitting it.

For Terry Birchler and Zukun Plan, that date was October 2018.

“By May 2018, a new expectation emerged: Reliance wanted a ‘show piece’ for the American Academy of Ophthalmology show (AAO) in October,” Birchler said.

Like a concept car in a car show, it was to be a physical, functioning model to gauge public interest and build enthusiasm for the brand. At this point, Zukun Plan had multiple product ideas, ultimately packing as many innovations as possible into a single, integrated lane, from a new slim-profile instrument stand to optimized physician ergonomics to patient comfort aesthetics.

Zukun Plan designers traveled the ophthalmic show circuit for the next year with the show model, constantly assessing any issues and garnering feedback from the public. Simultaneous to the shows, they were designing the ‘real’ version of the integrated lane.

“The integrated lane represents a paradigm shift,” said Dr. Cavin. “The ergonomics are transformative: its smaller and slimmer profile and integrated technology promotes effortless workflow, greater physician comfort, and easier patient interaction,” Dr. Cavin said.

“Its appearance is striking as well. With a clean, simple design, it can make the exam room as design-forward as the front of any contemporary practice.”



Creativity: the name of the game.

Launching a new product doesn’t end when the product is finished. Choosing the right marketing partner is just as crucial.

To shepherd XOMA Smart Lane to the marketplace, Reliance turned to Creative Department, their long-time marketing and advertising partner.

“Just as I trusted Zukun Plan with the development of the product itself, I implicitly trusted Creative Department with the creative launch,” Dr. Cavin said. “Again, it was important for me to protect their creative freedom. I know they know what they are doing.”

An effective launch campaign propels not only early engagement but also sustained sales growth. “Every interaction with the brand should inspire confidence,” said Lauren Anderson, Creative Department owner and Creative Director. “Customers should be eager to see what’s next from the company.”

Before any marketing materials for The Lane of the Future could be produced, an official name had to be chosen. The naming quest had begun even while the product was itself still in the ideation stages, but as with the product development process, the marketing process is rarely without its own hiccups.

“Creative Department had generated a long list of names with great potential. A handful really rose to the top, making it to legal for clearance,” recalls Dr. Cavin.

The names were unique and evocative and Creative Department had done due diligence in researching their viability to the extent they could, to make sure the names weren’t in use in the category, industry or consumer mainstream.

“But with a lot more tools at their disposable, lawyers dig deeper,” Dr. Cavin added.

Name after name kept running into obscure copyright issues. With creative production deadlines and the launch date looming, Dr. Cavin made the decision to leverage the name of an existing innovative Reliance exam system that shared some features with the new lane – XOMA. The name satisfied the criteria established from the outset for the new name – short, unique, memorable, modern. Adding a new extension that conveyed not only function but evolution, the name became the XOMA Smart Lane.

“We already owned the trademark and it ticked all the boxes, so at that point it became the perfect solution,” Dr. Cavin says.

With the name solidified, production of creative materials could begin. Reliance was happy. Creative Department was happy. The lawyers were happy.

XOMA SMART LANE

The most ergonomically sound, human-centric exam lane ever.

A disruptive product demands a campaign to match.

"From day one, we knew we had to build interest and intrigue," said Anderson. The product was scheduled to be revealed at a large trade show, but there was just one problem: it wouldn't be camera-ready in time to include in early marketing materials.

"Our solution was both pragmatic and conceptually perfect," Anderson continued. "We created a teaser campaign that didn't even show the product, just a silhouette of the XOMA Smart Lane, with a headline that simply read The Exam Lane, Re-Examined."



Beyond teaser print ads and emails, Creative Department developed an extensive integrated campaign that also included direct mail, a four-color brochure, landing pages, website updates, and trade show handouts. The energy and distinctiveness of both the innovation process and the product itself were perhaps best captured in a 2-minute "sizzle" video.

"To really drive awareness and build traction for a product, sometimes clients have to step outside their comfort zone," Anderson says. "We had an idea for a video which was quite different than what Haag-Streit has done in the past. But then so was this product."

The agency presented the script and storyboard along with a driving music track fittingly titled "Break Stuff", which gave rise to the video's overarching message: "Sometimes you gotta break stuff in order to fix it."

Dr. Cavin responded without hesitation, "Do it."

"As creative guardians of the product launch, Creative Department had free reign," say Dr. Cavin. "They kept me close to the process from start to finish, of course, but I was confident it would be a success."

Poised for success. And overcoming uncertainty.

While there is much within your company's control – a sharp, insightful strategy, trusted partners, a well-considered and -crafted product, a buzz-worthy campaign – the best laid plans can go awry. Most new products experience something that can throw off their timeline.

XOMA Smart Lane's development and creative teams faced and fought through their share of challenges. There were triumphs and setbacks. Yet they'd hit every important deadline with the launch date in sight.

But 2020 had other plans in store for everyone.

Times like these, as with all adversity and uncertainty, force companies to re-evaluate, pivot, or simply pause. New opportunities may present themselves. Added time may even allow for minor modifications.

Reliance's progress toward the launch was seriously challenged, by lockdowns, and supply chain interruptions. With the new launch date growing closer, the XOMA Smart Lane remains poised to transform the industry as the most ergonomically optimized ophthalmic lane ever.

The right partners, planning, and products will help you weather and withstand the tough times. And more than just launching a new product, they can help you launch a whole new future.

