

## LEADERS & SUCCESS

### **Post-it Creator Stuck With It Take Note: 3M's Art Fry faced stacks of cynics on his way to rewriting messages**

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Despite having the odds stacked against him, 3M inventor Art Fry stuck with his novel idea for sticky Post-it Notes. And, boy, did his invention ever stick.

Since those trademarked Post-it Notes debuted nationwide in 1980, they have become ubiquitous on desktops.

Yet Fry's product line was nearly killed off in the early stages of development because his concept seemed so unusual.

Undeterred, Fry kept pushing his idea until bosses and colleagues at 3M, and finally consumers at large, embraced his breakthrough in office supplies. In so doing, Fry revolutionized the simple task of making a note to one's self.

"It takes stamina to be an innovator," Fry, 75, said in a recent interview with IBD. "Barriers stop most people, but a good innovator goes around them."

The story of Post-it Notes started in 1968 at a 3M laboratory in St. Paul, Minn. The chemist Spencer Silver had just devised a new kind of adhesive that used molecular spheres -- like sticky marbles -- rather than flat surfaces to hold two materials together.

The adhesive had a unique property, as the glue bond was weak enough to let two stuck pages be pulled apart.

Silver knew he was on to something, but he couldn't quite figure out the best application for his creation. He tried putting it into a spray can and applying it to bulletin boards.

At the time, Fry was a 3M product development guru. It was his job to take the raw research ideas that emerged from the labs and come up with new ways to solve customer problems with them.

#### A New Note

By the mid-1970s, Fry was intrigued by Silver's adhesive. But Fry also puzzled over the best use for it.

Then, one Sunday in early 1975, he had an epiphany while singing in the North Presbyterian Church choir in St. Paul.

Fry had used strips of paper to mark the songs in his church hymnal. But he couldn't find the right music because the pieces of paper kept falling out.

"I think it was during the adult sermon; I wondered if I could make a bookmark that sticks to paper," Fry recalled. "I thought I could use those crazy little spheres in just the right amount to stick to the paper without tearing it."

In that brief moment of inspiration, Fry instantly sensed that he had something huge. "I could taste it on my breath, and I could just feel my blood pressure rise," he said. "I think this reaction is common with all creative people."

In the wake of this brilliant insight, Fry realized that much of the hard work lay ahead.

He would have to leap many technical hurdles while convincing the world that his idea was valuable, says **George Haley**, director of the Center for International Industrial Competitiveness.

"This is a cautionary tale about how even the simplest product can take a lot of effort before it ever succeeds," he said. "The genius of innovation involves persistence more than anything else."

For instance, an executive who ran the 3M adhesives division resisted any new path at first.

After all, the firm's trademarked Magic Tape product was already a big seller.

In addition, many 3M engineers, production staff and salespeople doubted the new product would succeed. They argued that scrap paper was already available for free. But Fry stuck to his belief. "It was a pioneer product with no market and no customers," he recalled. "I said that's wonderful, because it means we're the only ones thinking of something that is worthwhile."

Such a pattern is common among innovators, says Anthony Mayo, director of the Harvard Business School Leadership Initiative. He says most great ideas are first rejected by some naysayer.

"Fry had to convince everyone that this was a worthwhile investment without hard proof, because there wasn't any existing market to point to," Mayo said. "It required great perseverance and not taking no for an answer."

To spread the word, Fry gave out samples of Post-it Notes to fellow scientists and secretaries throughout the company.

That built up an internal network of supporters at 3M.

He also kept track of consumption rates and found that co-workers used seven to 20 pads of Post-its per year. That compared with just one roll of Magic Tape each.

Soon Fry recruited a 3M technical director and a vice president to champion Post-its to peers and superiors.

Fry followed that effort by sending samples to 3M's chief executive and his secretary. Both were thrilled with the product.

Samples were then mailed out to the CEOs of all the Fortune 500 companies.

Fry still had to devise a mass production system. 3M lacked any machines to manufacture such a product, so he tinkered with a prototype in his basement.

When the model was perfected, 3M had to knock out a door frame and part of Fry's garden wall to remove the machine.

Despite such progress, early consumer surveys still portrayed Post-it Notes as a flop.

Nobody could envision a need for notes that were "repositionable" or removable.

Yet field tests in Richmond, Va., revealed that the problem was due to a lack of consumer understanding.

When product samples were provided free to businesspeople, they immediately grasped the concept. Post-it Notes became a big hit in each subsequent test market.

Fry's experience proves that all great ideas still must be sold, often over the course of a marathon rather than a sprint, says David Newman, the author of "Sales Science." He's the head of Unconsulting, a motivational speaking firm based in Radnor, Pa.

"Almost all breakthroughs are like an overnight success that takes about 10 years," Newman said.

Successful inventors such as Fry are predisposed to taking risks and failing, notes Mayo.

"They're willing to have the door slammed in their faces while still maintaining a high level of confidence," he said. "Such setbacks actually push them forward."

3M does not release sales figures for its specific product lines. Yet Post-it Notes have been one of the company's hottest sellers for decades.

More than 1,000 Post-it Notes-brand products are now sold in more than 100 countries.

"The contributions of Art Fry and his team remain a classic example of the revolutionary impact of creative thought, perseverance and breakthrough technologies that continue to extend 3M's legacy of innovation and pioneering leadership," said Jack Truong, vice president of the 3M office supply unit.

Company Man

Fry retired to a St. Paul suburb in 1992.

Today he remains humble about his role in transforming the act of note taking.

He credits 3M for providing the financial support and teamwork to make such a success possible.

"There are some things that people can do by themselves," Fry said. "But often the thing you need is a big organization with deep pockets and great minds to solve the toughest problems."

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