

A Culture of Innovation



For Motley Fool, getting ideas wasn't an issue. But managing them was.

Website	Fool.com
Industry	Financial services, internet
Key challenges	Adoption
Why Kindling	Easy to use, great customer service
Key benefits	24/7 availability, ease of use, clear ROI

There are big ideas and then there are small ideas that make a big impact. The Motley Fool originated as a small idea by two brothers, Tom and David Gardner. It was a 16-page investment newsletter sent out to 1,000 friends and family (only 37 of whom opted to subscribe). Today, 18 years later, the Virginia-based organization is a market-leader in the multimedia Financial Services space.

What makes The Fool, as enthusiasts call it, different from the plethora of other financial websites and columnists? Culture and purpose. While most of their competitors favor the CNBC Wall Street package: stern, buttoned-up and composed, The Fool's culture is markedly different: open, loose and nimble. After all, not every financial media company has a tag line like "To Educate, Amuse & Enrich."

NEVER STOP INNOVATING

The most successful companies are extremely mindful of remaining innovative, either through skunk works or an independent faction that upholds the competitive spirit of R&D. In the case of The Motley Fool, co-founder David Gardner proudly champions this cause, highlighted by his title of "Chief Rule Breaker."

It's no secret that innovation is a highly prized asset at The Motley Fool. But as companies grow, cultures change, infrastructure gets thick and execution usually slows unless ingrained in the day-to-day. At The Motley Fool, management is keenly aware that staying relevant requires continually looking for the next big thing.

WHERE IDEAS BECOME PRODUCTS

By 2009, after an early AOL investment, an NPR radio show, several books on the New York Times bestseller list and 13 product offerings (including a successful premium subscription

business and an affiliated asset management business, The Fool's management team began looking forward yet again.

Figuring out what should come next led to dialogues with staff, current and prospective customers and an overall market landscape assessment to figure out what people in the financial industry wanted. Thanks to the company's well-established culture of collaboration and innovation, lively brainstorming ensued. But what the company lacked was a place to capture all the ideas and refine them across departments.

The well-respected and successful financial multimedia brand was using the familiar and broadly adopted wass-around method of ideation write it down on what's around: email, sticky notes, whiteboard, spreadsheet and post it on the Intranet. (Some organizations also refer to this as the "Black Hole of ideas.")

After 2+ years of working in the organization, CTO Scott Day knew firsthand that "The Fools" (company employees) consistently produced viable ideas. But without a formal method of documentation, clear project ownership or a prompt to circle back, great ideas were often abandoned and attendees rarely knew if anything ever came to fruition.

We had great internal participation, but innovation stopped once you left the meeting. And it wasn't always clear what came out of the brainstorming sessions, says Day.

WHY THEY CHOSE KINDLING

Already familiar with idea management and innovation tools, Day and the VP of Project Management, Max Keeler, sought the perfect tool to help them manage ideas and innovation. But they knew the hardest part would be getting employees to actually use them.

Adoption was key for us. We want people to participate in the conversation, not be overwhelmed by options and complexity, says Day.

After a brief procurement exercise, Day and Keeler took a hard look at Kindling. The elegant user interface immediately gained traction during internal demos and weeks later, on April Fool's Day, they launched Kindling across their 225-employee organization.

HOW THEY USE IT

Day and Keeler chose Kindling's Enterprise package, which includes SharePoint integration, LDAP authentication as well as a comprehensive mobile offering. The Motley Fool's well-established company roadmap and organizational structure immediately translated to the Kindling workflow concept of "rooms" and owners.

Pulling from the five core strategies in The Motley Fool's roadmap, Day and his team created five core "rooms" and assigned strategy captains to manage each room.

It helps us not waste energy on things that are outside what we're currently focused on, and allows us to educate staff on good ideas, explore the bad ideas and really identify the things that are closely aligned with our strategy," says Day.

For items or concepts that fell outside these five core rooms, (in other words, anything that doesn't classify as an immediate goal or ideas that cut across company themes), they have an "Other" room which are managed by "Fascination Councils" who are tasked with vetting ideas, creating sub-rooms and ensuring best practices are applied.

"When we showed off Kindling, people immediately got it and started participating. In fact, we were overwhelmed with how much participation we received.

Scott Day, CTO

"When we showed off Kindling, people immediately got it and started participating. In fact, we were overwhelmed with how much participation we received," says Day.

Today, The Motley Fool's agile development process translates seamlessly to the Kindling environment. Ideas that can be moved from ideation to execution, like culture changes, are implemented immediately. Those that require more technical resources are pushed into a Scrum whiteboard and moved through an agile methodology. Other ideas are managed quarterly and either refined in Kindling or moved to a Scrum backlog.

To keep users aware of the system, and as a friendly reminder of the collaborative culture at The Fool, a weekly email is sent out to all employees highlighting the top three ideas coming out of Kindling that week.

"My boss at the time, Scott Schedler, relied heavily on Kindling and the idea innovation to help determine what categories we were going to focus on. He was able to take ideas that were flushed out in Kindling and put them directly into the development phase," says Day.

FROM IDEA TO ROI

It didn't take long before a cleaner idea management system paid off. Day says that instead of losing valuable time trying to coordinate schedules to host a brainstorming session, brainstorming now happens 24/7, and ideas go through the roof.

Day recalls a time when web traffic was down and the company was struggling to get back to its normal numbers. They created

a campaign in Idea Factory (The Fool's internal name for Kindling), soliciting ideas to help solve their traffic issue.

The campaign allowed the entire company to participate in solving this corporate challenge. We had a high level of participation, and at least one idea from the campaign led to a change in how we publish our content and contributed to improving our traffic," says Day.

Especially for the younger employees, Kindling has been a huge hit and significantly aided in The Fool's innovation productivity. Keenly aware that Social Media tools are ingrained in the millennial and Gen X workflow, Kindling is promoted heavily and even introduced to new employees on day one.

Day admits The Fool's Idea Factory has had gotten silly at times—such as, "wouldn't it be cool to have a zip-line from our balcony to the train station?" and, "we need a mechanical dinosaur in the office"—but says ultimately this keeps life in the tool. Meanwhile, Kindling's leaderboard keeps the competitive spirit high.

While many of the idea contributors come from known voices and obvious departments, one of the most surprising things has been the new voices and contributors from both the front lines, like customer service and editorial.

We recently had a woman in customer service who pointed out that iPad and iPhone users couldn't view some videos. The solution was an unchecked checkbox on the part of our video provider to enable HTML5. It was something the tech team hadn't noticed yet and might not have for weeks or months, Day explains.

And what if they stopped using Kindling tomorrow?

At best, we'd move more slowly. At worst, we actually miss ideas or lose ideas," says Day. "I mean, the ideas will still be there, it's just that maybe they don't get bubbled up and don't get any visibility. And they more or less die because of that. That's the main thing we'd lose."

Visit www.kindlingapp.com to learn more about how Kindling can transform your organization's innovation program.