

Interview with Trisha Pergande

Marketing Director, Strategy and Innovation General Mills



Trisha Pergande is a Marketing Director on the iSquad, an internal consulting group at General Mills. The iSquad coaches the development of new product strategies for General Mills' divisions. Trisha has become recognized for her innovation knowledge within the industry. She spoke at the 2008 Front End of Innovation (FEI) Conference in Boston, and will serve as an advisory board member to assist in developing the focus of future FEI conferences.

Trisha has been with General Mills for 9 years. Previously, she worked at the Walt Disney Company and PricewaterhouseCoopers. Trisha has an MBA from University of California-Los Angeles, and a BS from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Trisha can be reached at trisha.pergande@genmills.com

Interview conducted by Doug Berger, Managing Partner, INNOVATE doug@innovate1st.com

Doug: Why don't you start us off by sharing the way in which General Mills thinks of innovation?

Trisha: Ultimately, innovation equals implementation of an idea that has value. In the long-term, value can be defined as its' financial value. But it can also be defined in terms of learning, and those small learnings that will contribute to what you are doing long-term.

General Mills has a long history of innovation. However, the focus on innovation as a core capability is relatively new. To consistently rely on innovation for growth, the company realized the need to expand its innovation strategies. Historically, General Mills has leveraged the traditional stage gate model when trying to commercialize a new idea. Stage-gate is a great process once you have a project identified. The problem that we were facing was trying to consistently identify the next new opportunity. Our approach was slow. It was random, and it relied heavily on serendipity. Within General Mills, we often had people on the team rotating to different divisions, and the knowledge that was garnered during a new product development project was lost.

General Mills wanted to develop an approach for identifying new product opportunities that was more systematic and repeatable. Our approach leverages an idea that came from an article written by professors at the Kellogg Business School, titled "Seven Innovation Myths." One of the ideas was that structure and process do not have to be the enemies of innovation. Just enough structure and process can facilitate

innovation. We applied this concept at General Mills by creating small, experienced, cross-functional catalyst teams trained specifically in innovation and facilitation (the “structure”). Our team, known internally as the iSquad, leads business teams through new product explorations and leverages best practice approaches to innovation (the “process”).

Doug: How do the iSquad and your innovation framework operate?

Trisha: The iSquad is referred to as a catalyst team. We think of *catalyst* in the sense that the iSquad doesn’t own the innovation. Instead, the iSquad acts as a catalyst for the business teams to be able to act on innovation. The iSquad owns and leads the innovation process and the business teams own the business opportunities. The iSquad works on the business teams’ priorities, which increases the probability of successful implementation. The iSquad does not try to force ideas on to the business teams. The business teams create and own their ideas. An analogy is that the iSquad acts as a highway. We try to provide a smooth process on the innovation highway. The business teams are the cars. They decide where they are going, how fast they want to go, and when to adjust their destination and course. This is a shift from our traditional mode of operation, when the content and process were not separate.

Doug: So, the General Mills philosophy of innovation is to distinguish between the process owner and the business opportunity owner?

Trisha: Correct. This group formed very organically, on a small scale, and a bit under the radar. It was about experimenting and prototyping. There was this belief that there was a better way, but we didn’t exactly know what the better way was. At the onset, it was about trying to improve within the system, versus saying “We’re going make General Mills the best innovator in the world.” For the first iSquad project, we sought out a business team that was willing to pilot an innovation project to work with us in a new way.

The iSquad has been around now for almost five years and has worked with many of the General Mills businesses. Each project gets better by building on the learnings from earlier projects. It is a continually evolving process. The mantra on our team is “progress, not perfection.” Every time we take two steps forward and we get better at innovation, we identify another innovation opportunity or another challenge. Using that model to continually evolve our approach has been helpful.

Another fundamentally important element is that iSquad team members are experienced and come from multidisciplinary backgrounds within General Mills.

Doug: Let’s talk about how the iSquad process works.

Trisha: Overall, the iSquad process was developed to help shift the teams’ goals from the development of particular ideas to the development of strategies with clearly defined opportunity spaces where multiple ideas can live. If a specific idea fails, we can go back and further mine an opportunity space. The framework that we’ve developed is based upon creative problem solving frameworks and has been branded internally as **I³**. It was important to create a common vernacular for how we were going to approach this process for innovation. Creating that common vernacular gave people a roadmap for where we were and where we were headed.

The first “I” stands for **Immersion**. This phase is about immersing the team in existing information to gain an overall understanding. We refer to this phase as “the head” of the process because it’s about building collective team knowledge on the

problem. The overall focus of immersion is leveraging the information that's already out there. Information can be internal and external. Examples of internal information might be past research of an ethnographic, qualitative or quantitative nature. It might include talking to past employees who have worked on the brand. It might be synthesizing and looking through all of the ideas that have been generated in the past. Information from an external perspective might include competitive landscape reviews, syndicated research, patent searches, or discussions with experts in the industry who can tell us about the problem.

The second "I" stands for **Interaction**, which is experiencing the problem first hand. When we talk about interaction, it's interaction with our consumers and interaction with their environment. The focus here is allowing the team to build intuition through deep consumer understanding and observation. On the iSquad, we want people to be comfortable using their gut. There are not always numbers, facts and figures to support a decision. We believe that you have to build informed intuition through deep consumer observation and understanding. This process also helps our team members step into the shoes of the consumers. We do a lot of personal experience work so that they can experience what a consumer would be facing in different types of situations. We often refer to Interaction as "the heart" of the process because it's about building real empathy for and intuition with consumers.

The third "I" stands for **Ideation**. Our approach is based on the fundamental principle that as soon as you are exposed to new information, you should immediately convert that knowledge into action. Our process is inherently divergent and is about creating a landscape of possibilities. Whether we are being immersed in factual statistics or we're spending time with our consumers, the teams will immediately convert new information into new ideas and possibilities for our businesses. At this stage, we use the divergent ideas to start identifying the opportunity area spaces and to map out the places a business could go for growth. Divergent thinking turns traditional business thinking on its head because the focus is on letting the strategy emerge from the details. The more details you can create, the more you can start to understand the strength of some strategies versus others.

Doug: Would you take us through the I³ as applied to a specific innovation that's now in the marketplace?

Trisha: Let's talk about a project on weight management. For a long time, we have known that the area of weight management was a strong need for consumers. We had several weight management initiatives going on in different divisions within the company and there were many weight management products being introduced in the marketplace. General Mills knew it was a large opportunity but we hadn't been looking at the opportunity synergistically across the company. In 2006, the iSquad led a multidivisional exploration effort to holistically go after this opportunity space of weight management. The goal was to identify opportunities for our brands and to identify areas for collaboration between our brands. When we kicked off this project, we had a simplistic and product-centric view of the world of weight management. In the world of food, that meant looking at product attributes such as low fat, reduced sugar, and portion control.

We worked with three divisions and went through the I³ framework. For the immersion process we started by mining existing research. We did reverse engineering of weight management products already out in the marketplace. We looked at the packaging and advertising, and tried to reverse engineer the insight and say, "How might we be able to apply that insight to our businesses?" Often, what we find most valuable in reverse engineering is looking outside of our immediate

competitive set; in this instance it was looking outside of food to places such as fitness centers or weight loss centers. We did a deep dive into our past projects to say: What's worked? What hasn't worked? What might we do differently? We talked to obesity psychologists. We learned the rational drivers and more importantly, the emotional drivers. The whole philosophy of the Immersion phase was to understand and build collective team knowledge from what's already out there.

Interaction was about building empathy with our consumers. One of the first things we did was have everyone go on a diet. Members of the team went on different diets. It's really hard to learn about the problem as a spectator. You need to do it yourself. We also spent a lot of time with consumers. Over the course of the project, we spent time in consumers' homes, shopping with them, eating with them, reading their personal journals, spending time on blog sites to expand our frame of reference. We also went on trend treks, going to nutrition stores, weight loss centers and gyms, to understand from an experiential standpoint what is going on in the surround.

The immersion and interaction phases work together to get teams aligned around the strategy to move forward. The immersion phase provides all of the rational reasons why we'd want to go after a particular opportunity space. The interaction phase provides the real life stories, stories that are often emotional and allow the team to connect with the opportunity space on a personal level. Given that the whole company can't go through the innovation process, the rational and emotional stories provide the mechanism to translate that learning to other team members and stakeholders who will support and champion these innovations into the marketplace.

On to ideation. As I mentioned, we ideate throughout the process. Over the course of the process, we generated over 500 ideas, ranging from simplistic idea nuggets to 2D concepts and 3D prototypes. Through the course of the development of those 500 ideas, we'll start to mine them and say, "Okay, what themes are starting to emerge?" The real ideas, supported by consumer insights, help to dimensionalize the opportunity spaces and bring the opportunity areas to life. The team can start to define those opportunity spaces where ideas are starting to cluster. Organically you start to see more energy emerge around certain opportunity spaces.

Doug: How much time would you spend in the I³ cycle? How many people from the businesses were involved?

Trisha: A typical project lasts somewhere between two and four months. And a typical team size is somewhere between 8 and 12 people, and will include a core team, an extended team, and a sponsor team. The core team will drive the overall process in collaboration with the iSquad and will own the final implementation of the project. The core team at General Mills tends to be our traditional functions, such as marketing, consumer insights, and R&D. The extended team includes vested team members who have a lot of knowledge to bring to the project and will be involved in most working sessions. The extended team may include members from design, sales, or our Betty Crocker kitchens. The third team includes the project sponsors, who ultimately provide the support to move the initiative forward within the organization.

Doug: What is the resource commitment within the iSquad?

Trisha: A typical iSquad team consists of two to three people who lead the initiative and own the process. They are often working on several innovation initiatives at a time, and thus are not working full time on any one project. One of the principles that we rely on is co-creation. Project ownership and development is shared with the business team for two reasons. First, by engaging the team in the development of the plan, we

are building innovation capabilities within the organization. Second, by getting the team engaged on a personal level, they become committed to the project and they become champions for the process and the output. The iSquad facilitates the working sessions and ideation sessions. The core team owns the development of content and ensures extended team participation throughout.

Doug: What follows immersion, interaction and ideation?

Trisha: We develop an opportunity area map. Before going into the weight management project we might have said, "Oh, there are three ways into weight management." Coming out of this process we said, "There are 25 opportunity areas within this space, all of them different ways to approach the consumer."

In innovation, you can't do everything. The development of a strategic opportunity map allows the teams to have discussions about which areas they want to pursue but, more importantly, which areas they're not going to pursue. It's all about making strategic choices for your business. These discussions have been very helpful in allowing teams to stay focused on a strategy and not creating knee-jerk reactions to every competitor move in the marketplace. The discussion has also been helpful in keeping people focused on opportunity areas versus specific ideas. You can kill an idea but you can't kill an opportunity area. An opportunity area should be rich enough for the development of many ideas and executions.

Doug: Jumping to the end of the story, there were a number of things that General Mills actually did commercialize out of this.

Trisha: One of the things that came out of this was the new Progresso Light soup with a 0 POINTS endorsement from Weight Watchers that we launched this year. The idea for a 0 POINTS Weight Watchers' endorsed soup came out of the opportunity area that we call the *Math of Dieting*. The idea is that people need to be able to track their progress while they're on their diet. What was great about this line of 0 POINTS soups is that zero is very easy to track. It allows consumers to curb their hunger without sabotaging their diet. The Progresso team was able to tap into this Weight Watchers community, a strong equity within the weight management space, and launch the first consumer packaged goods product with a 0 POINTS value. It has been a significant success for the Progresso business and achieved more than \$100 million in retail sales in its first year on the market.

Another example is Warm Delights Minis by Betty Crocker. This idea came out of the opportunity area that we termed *Bridging the Bewitching Hour*. The bewitching hours are between meal times: mid-morning, afternoon before dinner, and at night. The insight was that people fall off their diets during these bewitching hours. They are looking for food that helps them stay on their diet, yet satisfies their cravings. Warm Delights Minis is a 150-calorie dessert that they can make quickly. It uses controlled packaging so it helps people stop overeating and it was inspired by very indulgent desserts, like molten chocolate cake. One big challenge that people have when they're trying to manage their weight is that they're always sacrificing. This allows them to feel like they don't have to sacrifice.

Doug: What are some of the difficulties that challenge the framework?

Trisha: The framework itself has not been challenged. But one of the innovation challenges that we face is being able to continue to cross boundaries for collaboration. Prior to the weight management project, we hadn't conducted a cross-divisional innovation initiative for collaboration. Now we are trying to cross-boundaries not just across General Mills, but across companies and across the globe. In 2007, we officially launched the General Mills Worldwide Innovation Network (G-WIN), designed to expand and accelerate the innovation advances already under way within the company. Through G-WIN, General Mills seeks external partners with new products and technologies that will be complementary to its brands and businesses. Through our efforts to become more externally focused, we have opened our organization to the brain-power of literally thousands of great inventors around the world. G-WIN has proven to be a key resource and growth accelerator for General Mills, receiving more than 200 concept submissions in its first year.

Doug: In conclusion, what final comments would you like to make?

Trisha: Progress, not perfection. Innovation is a journey, not a destination.

