

**Rudolph and Santa provide a lesson in innovation that could improve business and government.**

# REVENGE OF THE INNOVATIVE OUTCASTS

By JACQUELINE BYRD

Standing in the shower recently, I got to thinking that I really hadn't gotten into the "spirit of Christmas."

I was two weeks behind on decorations and shopping and worrying about business prospects in the new year when I turned on my iPhone to a Christmas music station.

As I was toweling down, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" came on. Suddenly I was swept up in the spirit. Then something interesting happened: I listened to those old familiar words in a different way:

"Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, had a very shiny nose, and if you ever saw it, you would even say it glows. All of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names. They'd never let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games."

At one time or another, we've all experienced the feeling of being rejected by our peers or ridiculed for a feature or an affectation. Now take that to the next step and consider that experience in terms of innovators. How many times have innovators stepped forward with new approaches and found themselves shunned by their peer groups — not unlike the reindeer that refused to let Rudolph play. Several rather well-known innovators came to mind. Here's what happened when they introduced their proposed innovations:

**Example 1:** Steve Jobs created the personal computer out of the pure force of his will. The experts had labeled the personal computer as a niche hobbyist product. Those experts — with IBM leading the charge — proclaimed that the PC would only appeal to a market consisting of long-haired radical hippies with a flair for technological innovation. Jobs and Steve Wozniak refused to listen to the experts. They blazed the trail of uncertainty.

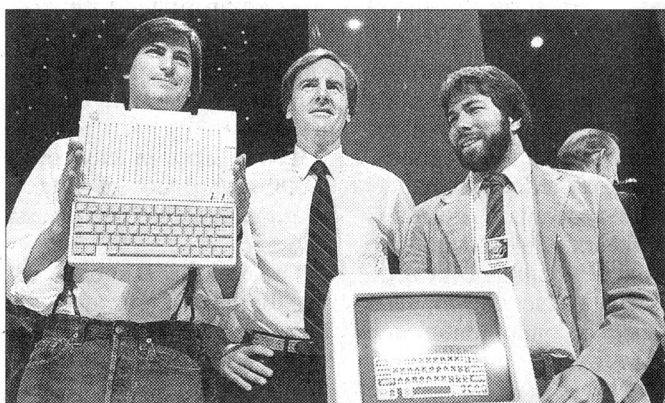
**Example 2:** Marion Donovan invented disposable diapers in the late 1940s. Companies to which she presented it told her that her product would be too expensive to produce, so she went into business for herself.

**Example 3:** When Fred Smith started Federal Express, now called FedEx, the U.S. Postal Service and UPS predicted Smith's demise. But Smith believed his own vision, ignored the criticism that he was "being crazy" and brought the business plan that he'd originally sketched in a college term paper to life in the early 1970s.

Let me be careful here; some ideas get through because of the innovator's sheer force of will. Innovators believe in what they do at all costs and can be abrasive and direct to a point of alienating and even hurting others. With innovators, it's ideas first, people who get in their way second.

Admittedly, Rudolph didn't come off that way — if anything, he seemed mild-mannered. Perhaps what's really important are not the innovators themselves, but those who need to pay attention to them. Are you hearing the innovations or are you missing the opportunities they present?

Santa didn't. Santa needed



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Steve Jobs, left, John Sculley and Steve Wozniak of Apple unveiled the new Apple IIc computer in San Francisco in 1984.

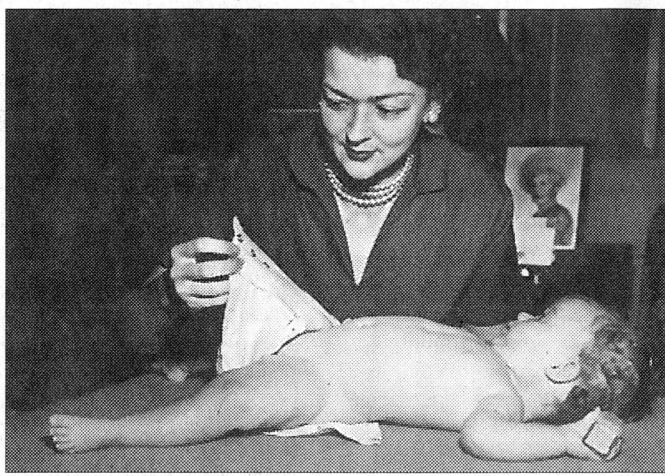
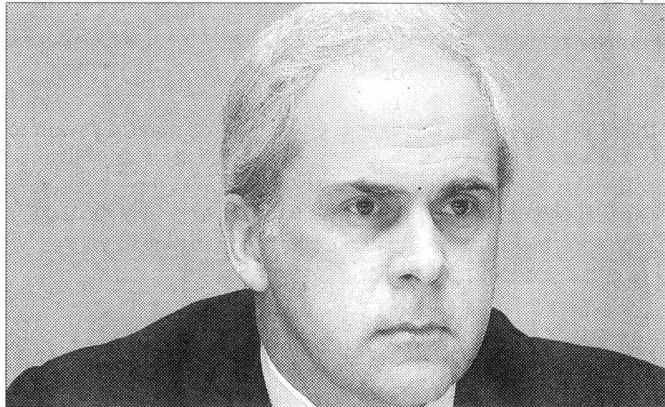


Photo courtesy of National Museum of American History

Marion Donovan, inventor of the disposable diaper, gave a baby a change in 1949 with her design known as "the Boater."



Associated Press

Fred Smith, founder of Federal Express (now FedEx), brought to life the vision he'd first sketched out in a college term paper.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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a solution, someone to guide his sleigh. Santa gave Rudolph credibility.

Often we ignore innovations that come forward until suddenly either someone else we admire recognizes them as innovations or our competitors recognize them and catch us unaware.

Why can't we pay attention before the proverbial "Santa Claus" does? What is it that prevents us from being readily open to new ideas? My research, as well as that of others, shows that only five of every 100 people are innovators.

A few people called synthesizers and practicalizers come up with creative ideas but are often not as assertive

or aggressive as innovators. Most people can see the viability of incremental and realistic improvements but have a hard time seeing the opportunity of a completely new idea. If we saw all ideas as possibilities, it would change the way we frame those ideas.

Author Thomas Friedman, in his book "The World is Flat," writes that in today's global economy, "the biggest competition is between you and your imagination."

It behooves us to think about the Rudolphs who are already out there. Who are the innovators in your company or organization?

Fast-forward to a new president and a new administration. Are these people able to see the Rudolphs? Are they the Santas we need today? If you think about the economy, the wars and what it's going to take to solve our energy and health care challenges, the call for innovation and innovators is everywhere.

We are at a crossroads. We will either miss the opportunities or seize them, just as Santa did. Merry Christmas!