

## Know your customer

**TO ENSURE YOU'LL MEET** customers' needs, test new products and services first with the people who'll use them. Opinions of others can't be relied on.

If anyone wants to short-circuit this step relate this story:

The Anglo-Dutch firm Unilever enthusiastically launched a revolutionary new washing powder called Persil Power' across Europe in 1994.

The product, heralded as the first new technological breakthrough in detergents in 15 years, had taken 10 years and more than £100 million to develop.

It contained a manganese catalyst that washed clothes whiter at lower temperatures.

The properties of manganese had been well known in the industry, but no firm could produce a catalyst that did not also damage clothes.

Unilever tested its powder in some 60,000 households and more than 3 million washes, then protected its development with 35 patents.

However, Unilever's tests were in Dutch

households.

Typically, Northern Europeans separate their whites from their coloured wash, and they tend to read product instructions.

In contrast, consumers in Southern Europe usually wash whites and dyed fabrics together, and most wash everything on a hot wash, regardless of instructions to the contrary.

The manganese catalyst was fine at low temperatures for whites only, but reacted with certain dyes at higher temperatures – damaging those clothes.

After a fierce public relations battle, Unilever withdrew the product and wrote off some £300 million in development and marketing costs.

Since then Unilever has radically re-organised its product development process to improve communications between the research, development, and marketing functions.

SOURCENOTE: Joe Tidd, John Bessant, and Keith Pavitt,  
MANAGING INNOVATION INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGIES,  
and ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE