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## Tough Questions And Great Answers: General Mills Steps Up To The Open Innovation Plate

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November 11, 2009 in [Open Innovation](#) by [Stefan Lindegaard](#) | [No comments](#)

At a first glance, the [G-WIN initiative \(https://openinnovation.generalmills.com/\)](https://openinnovation.generalmills.com/) by General Mills looks just like the many other open innovation portals that are popping up right now.

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So rather than just giving my two cents on this, I did an interview with Jeff Bellairs, who is director of General Mills Worldwide Innovation Network, to get a better understanding of the whys and hows of this initiative.

This turned into a great learning experience that I would like to share with others. I kicked off the interview by telling Jeff that I was kind of neutral on their project. Some things looked good and others not so good. I also mentioned that a press release they'd recently sent out on the project and the portal itself raised several questions.

I asked quite direct and candid questions and I did not really expect much from his answers. So the open and informative feedback given by Jeff Bellairs was quite a pleasant surprise. The interview went like this:

### **Can you explain the WHY behind this initiative?**

We have learned an incredible amount in the more than four years that we have had a dedicated Connected Innovation program and our new Web site reflects much of those insights. One of the key things we discovered was that we needed a more efficient way to match our top business needs with the talent who had the potential to solve those problems and meet those needs.

We believe that through our alpha partnership with inno360, we are well on our way to developing a 'connection workbench' that will accelerate our efforts to clearly articulate our business needs and identify needed talent. The following are key Web site enhancements based upon our learning:

- Clearly articulated needs
- Non-confidential submission process
- Timely reviews
- Invitation to join G-WIN network so that we 'push' needs to individuals with the right skills and interest

### **How does General Mills define open innovation?**

We actually prefer the term Connected Innovation. At its core, it's all about connecting more effectively to smart people who can help us meet our business needs. The connection could be with colleagues, suppliers, other food companies or perhaps companies in entirely

different industries. Our program is focused on building the tools and processes needed to connect most effectively across this spectrum of possibilities.

**What is the link from this initiative to your innovation strategy? And how does this help your overall corporate strategy?**

Our innovation strategy is to build a rich pipeline of new products and product enhancements that deliver high levels of taste, health and convenience to consumers. Our Connected Innovation program seeks to enhance and accelerate those efforts by leveraging the global pool of scientists, engineers and other creative individuals who can solve technical problems and supply needed capabilities.

**Which actions have you taken to become the preferred partner of choice within your industry? My early observation is that the G-WIN portal does not really seem to focus on others than General Mills.**

The 'partner of choice' moniker is earned by consistent actions and by demonstrated leadership in the Open Innovation area. We believe that we have the needed elements in place to earn that title and are well on our way. We have:

- A dedicated External Partner Development group focused on building creative business models and partnering relationships so that both General Mills and our partners receive value. Our goal is to create mutually beneficial relationships and to reward our partners equitably for their contributions.
- A team of Innovation Entrepreneurs dedicated to each of our businesses who triage submission on a timely basis and seamlessly integrate external components into development projects.
- A dedicated centralized Connected Innovation Team that is developing new tools and methodologies and sharing much of that work through publications and speaking engagements.
- We have developed a portfolio of successful products, have a growing list of awards and external recognitions and most importantly, have a number of partners who are seeing tangible rewards from partnering with General Mills.

**On this, I would like to know more about which actions you have taken to make the connection between external and internal resources as smooth as possible in the introduction as well as the integration phases?**

Great question. About a year ago we took a retrospective look at many of our Connected Innovation projects, paying special attention to those where there had been a "speed bump" along the way. We learned that while we have a well-grooved process for commercializing internally developed products; we were missing a similar process for on-boarding externally sourced technologies and products.

Our answer has been to establish an External Speed Team, a cross-functional team that meets every other week to openly discuss projects, share insights and to make sure the appropriate communications are taking place.

In addition, we launched our Innovation Entrepreneur program so that we have dedicated Connected Innovation resources (or people) in each of our business divisions. Those

individuals have a number of responsibilities, one of them assuring effective integration of externally sourced capabilities into the business pipeline of initiatives.

**The press release mentions that “partners who help the company achieve its innovation goals can benefit from General Mills’ resources, scale and credibility in the marketplace to advance their own business.” Can you elaborate a bit on this?**

With sales of almost \$16 billion, General Mills is the 6th largest food company in the world and a company with tremendous scale. We have a portfolio of brands that are among the most trusted and respected in the food industry and a dedicated sales force who can assure that we get immediate distribution on new products. These are critical elements needed for success and elements that most entrepreneurs don’t have access to.

When we approach a partnering opportunity, we work to build synergistic relationships where our unique capabilities supplement and enhance the capabilities of the partner. We believe that the barriers to entry are low in the food business but that the barriers to attaining scale are high. Our resources and capabilities can reduce those barriers.

**Which steps have you take towards building eco-systems of partners working together to develop new products, solutions, ideas and technologies?**

We often talk about the four levels of connected innovation. The first three being effective internal collaboration; collaboration with suppliers and other trusted partners and collaboration with new partners. We talk about the fourth level being one of building new collaboration models and in that area we have a number of efforts underway. Two examples are:

- Consortia - We are actively experimenting with consortia models that pool resources and insights, create scale and mitigate risks in a project in the sustainability area
- We are building an ecosystem of partners whose combined skills will enable us to meet a need in the health and wellness space. As we mapped the existing ecosystem we learned that no one partner could solve the problem alone, but that by bringing the companies together with the right focus and vision, we believe we are well on the way toward a breakthrough technology.

**The G-WIN project seems to focus on R&D within General Mills. How do you involve other types of innovation and business functions as well?**

Our Open Innovation program began within the R&D organization. As our program has grown it has spread across much of our organization. We firmly believe that we can be even more successful as we tap into the smart people outside of General Mills who can help us drive our businesses forward, whether they impact our R&D, Operations, Marketing or some other aspect of our business.

**What were the biggest obstacles internally on this project?**

The biggest challenge has been simplifying the very complex process of articulating needs and matching those needs to key players in the global talent pool. Our goal has been to create a ‘connection workbench’ that our developers can use to architect new connections. We are delighted with the thought leadership and talent at inno360 and believe that we are making great progress towards building that simple, intuitive workbench.

Upon receiving these answers from Jeff, I e-mailed back:

"This is great stuff! It gives a much better picture of your open innovation efforts and I really like several of your initiatives. Why did you not include some of this information on the Web site? I am especially thinking about your answers related to "partner of choice" and how to connect internal and external resources. If I was on the other end, I would be pleased to know you have such initiatives."

To this, Jeff replied:

"The reason some of this information isn't on the Web site yet is that we're still evolving our Web site and have a redesign planned for early next calendar year. We wanted to get the word out on the new capabilities of the innovation portal now, rather than wait until the full redesign. So, we appreciate and welcome your thoughts and input on the type of information that would be most useful to outside partners."

I like the fact that General Mills acknowledges that they are still learning and that they are brave enough to start learning on the fly in the real world and get the feedback needed to improve their initiative. Kudos to General Mills on this as well as for their insights on how to approach open innovation.

**Tags:** [eco-system](#), [General Mills](#), [preferred partner](#)

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