

This article first appeared in the June 2020 issue of Eureka!NEWS. It is repeated here as we believe the subject matter, while only an overview also represents something interesting. Besides, it may keep the conversation going and add to your understanding about coming up with useful ideas as new products, inventions and innovations are presented to the buying public all the time.



What else is there left to Invent?

THE COMING CENTURY.

SCENE—Office of a Publisher. Enter a Genius.

Genius. I want to see the manager of the book department.

Boy. Oh, there isn't one, Sir.

Genius. Well, who looks after the pictures?

Boy. That's done by machinery, Sir.

Genius. Isn't there a clerk who can examine patents.

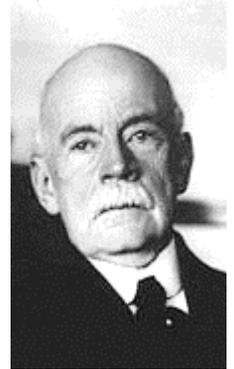
Boy. Quite unnecessary, Sir. Everything that can be invented has been invented.

Genius. Well, I want to leave a novel, a picture, and an idea.

Boy. You must be rather old-fashioned, Sir. All sorts of work is done, nowadays, by mental photography.

In 1889, Charles H. Duell was the **Commissioner of US patent office** declared that the patent office would soon shrink in size, and eventually close, because

“Everything that can be invented has been invented.”



While there is no direct evidence that Mr. Duell made that curious statement - the [1899 edition of Punch Magazine](#) reports that it was actually said by a patent office clerk – but it's very likely that the clerk was just quoting his boss. In 1899 clerks didn't have opinions!

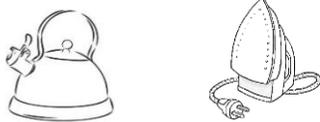
Anyway, we don't agree that there is nothing more to be invented or improved or discovered. Perhaps it comes down to a definition of what an invention is? Maybe it's because we expect any new invention to be extraordinary or amazingly advanced beyond what's now possible to be called an 'invention', but that's not the case.

Granted, there are extraordinary ideas and many prior advances that were revolutionary and remarkable in their time, but an invention need not be revolutionary or even unique to be useful, significant and/or noteworthy (and patentable). When you consider this further you will see that many fine and new inventions are usually derivatives of their predecessors in some way and that most innovation is the result of joining forces with previous thinkers and creating something new known as you know as the diffusion of ideas.



Think of these every-day utility items. How many versions can you think of, both old and new? No Google search is needed to note the different developments, features, uses, designs, materials and more involved. No.

Without doubt, there is a never-ending need for creativity, original thought, innovation and invention.



Further, nothing is so basic nor so great that it cannot be made better or improved upon. Times change. People change, demands change ... and so much more. Very often, the more one studies something, (a painting is a good example) the more about the object becomes apparent. Previously undiscovered nuances make themselves known by constant study. Regardless of how much is known, there is more to learn and understand and develop, and it is this knowledge that can lead to relevant innovation.

Invention infers original thought (etc.) and innovation infers difference and improvement somehow, yet these concepts are inescapably intertwined, they form a circular body, one relying on the other. What was an invention may lead to innovation which in turn could lead to further invention.

As an in-basket case study, take the simple bicycle bell as an example. This bicycle bell on the left is the one you'd see on Postman Pat's bike and while they are still around, they're outdated, though with few changes, still serve the bicycle manufacturers for the everyday 'utility' bike.



It was designed by **John Richard Dedicoat**, a British inventor, in the late 19th century. His vision — a simple rounded piece of metal with a small lever that would yield a simple “ding” — has endured for more than a century; but the changes, improvements and innovations that have happened around bicycle design, has meant that the simple bicycle bell design has also been turned upside down.

When you are a serious biker (and there are many around!) you may invest anything from R25, 000 to R500, 000 on your 'magnificent machine' and while there are no standard rules or by-laws for having or not having a bike bell, it just makes sense to have something to help a rider navigate heavily trafficked city streets or multi-use pathways ... or anywhere where a bell can be effective at providing advanced notice of your presence so that people can move out of your way. But, no-one wants to put a cheap mass-produced ding bell on a R300, 000 plus carbon fibre road bike!

Enter two examples of innovation and design that meet customer 'needs', are luxurious, expensive (?) yet utilitarian enough to suit the upper-end market – the Spurcycle bell and the Oi bell, the latter having been designed by Australian bike accessories company Knog.

These two products serve the same market but are fierce competitors. Nothing wrong with that. The Spurcycle bell has a distinct dome shape, is made of premium nickel brass and stainless steel and has a long polite ring that reverberates some 30 metres or so. The Oi-bell is significantly more discreet in design. It is a bell that doesn't look or sound anything like a bike bell with its 'glockenspiel' ding. It's a sleek bit of titanium that wraps around the handlebar like a bracelet.



The Spurcycle bell



Oi bell



Which one would you buy? Personal choice of course, given that you own the right bike, but bells are still utilitarian products (remember that as an inventor) so it seems in this instance that function trumps design. Opinion has it that the Spurcycle does the job better. Arguments continue ...

Words by Celeste Mulholland