

Rules of Innovation From a Wal-Mart Pro

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When Wal-Mart launched its in-store health care clinics in 2005, Alicia Ledlie went from co-manager of a store in Uniondale, Long Island, to senior director for health business development. Ledlie first heard about the new venture at a conference at Wal-Mart HQ. She immediately applied for a job with the clinic start-up team, and a month later she moved to Bentonville, Ark., to join the experimental project. (To learn more about her involvement in the launch, see [“How They Did It: Seven Intrapreneur Success Stories.”](#))

The project represents a revolutionary concept: Wal-Mart partners with local hospitals and health-care providers to run independent clinics within Wal-Mart stores. Clinics are open seven days a week, and hours include nights and weekends. Under Ledlie’s direction, Wal-Mart has opened 79 in-store clinics in 12 states, and it has plans to add as many as 2,000 such clinics in the next five to seven years.

Here are Ledlie’s top tips for folks who want to move the companies they work for into new frontiers:

1. Exploit Your Company’s Competitive Advantages

“You really need to know how your company is uniquely suited to succeed in this endeavor,” Ledlie says. “Once you’ve thought it through, it can sell itself.” In Wal-Mart’s case, the first advantage was size. Rather than crowding clinics in a corner, the company’s megastores were able to accommodate them up front, near the check-out areas, and still have enough space for examinations and common lab tests.

The second advantage, Ledlie says, was the retailer’s variety of merchandise. “After a customer visits the clinic for a sore throat, he can shop the rest of the store for a carton of orange juice, an extra blanket, and throat lozenges, saving time and simplifying his life.”

2. Enlist Key Supporters at the Top

To ensure success, you need more than a green light from those in charge: You need passionate supporters in management who believe in what you’re doing. Once you’ve identified top-level allies, Ledlie says, make a constant effort to foster them. Keep them updated on your project’s progress so they feel empowered with the latest information and can better champion your cause to others.

But be sure to keep them in the loop on problems, too. “Don’t sugar-coat setbacks or obstacles to your champion, or it could make you both look foolish,” she says. “Everyone knows you need

powerful allies, but it's just as important to understand how to keep them." Ledlie said she sends email updates on her project's progress to C-level executives, and she circulates summary documents with answers to FAQs to keep everyone up to speed and invested in the project's success.

3. Recruit Allies in Other Departments

In addition to friends in high places, you'll also benefit from alliances in mid- and entry-level positions, where people develop valuable specialized knowledge. When you're refining product features or developing a business plan, look to people in other departments for ideas and feedback. Ledlie says some of the suggestions she found most helpful came from folks in the legal and finance departments — and at Wal-Mart subsidiary Sam's Club. "When you get people excited about your idea, you'll be surprised to find out that someone from a seemingly random department might hold the key to unlocking the potential of your business," she says. "Sometimes it's as easy as letting them know what you're doing."

4. Look Beyond Quantifiable Metrics

A big part of intrapreneuring is selling your idea up the management chain — and then convincing those in charge that you're meeting your goals. Ledlie says one of the most powerful moves you can make is deciding what your variables for success are and understanding how to gather data to fulfill those metrics. Most of us get information from market research and customer surveys, but another source that's just as powerful — if not more so — is anecdotal. "There is no more powerful way to communicate why your idea is an improvement than to use the words of a customer or employee who is clamoring for it," she says.

Don't lose sight of your quantifiable goals, of course; they will tell you *how* you're going to achieve what you set out to do. "But if you keep the words of your customers in the front of your mind," Ledlie says, "you won't lose sight of the *who* and the *why* of what you're doing."