

Your Idea: Reveal it or not?

Stealth Mode: How good is it for entrepreneurs to keep their ideas under wraps and not share it until the final product or service is ready for launch?

/Vimarsh Bajpai

When Dinesh Goel envisioned Ideas Infinite, a service provider of standardized and customized innovation solutions to corporates, academia, students, associations, media and the society at large, he decided to consult extensively with people in his network to get feedback. For over three years, the consultations with his mentors, advisors, innovation practitioners and prospective customers resulted in him visiting the drawing board several times to ponder over the nature of products and services that he wanted to offer. So, no stealth mode for Goel, who says “by keeping your idea to yourself you run the risk of limiting yourself in almost every aspect of your venture, which eventually leads to lot of changes, modifications, improvements after the launch and learning essential things after mistakes have been made.”

What is stealth mode?

It is a state of secrecy maintained by a company to deliberately hide its idea or an upcoming product or



service from being known until it is ready for launch. Usually large corporations get into stealth mode while developing a new product or launching a new service primarily to avoid their competition from knowing about it. "Talking of startups, earlier, say ten years ago, when access to information was a big challenge, stealth mode used to work

very well. It used to give that edge. But now things have changed," says Vijay Shukla, Founder, Setu Ventures.

Should you be in stealth mode?

"A good way to answer this is by asking yourself 'Are you doing something different' or 'Are you doing an existing thing differently'. In case of the former, it is better to develop it

in stealth mode so as to retain the competitive advantage over others," says Arun Balakrishnan CEO, Founding Director, Fintact.com (Bigslick Infotech), in reply to a question on LinkedIn. He adds that feedback from people (prospective customers, partners, etc) might not be very useful as it is something they have never used till now. Inherently people resist change and if it is something very new, the initial response from them might not be that good, which can be demoralizing, he adds

Making a product or developing a service for a customer without taking feedback might not be a great idea because eventually he is the one you want to spend money to buy. Adds Balakrishnan, "The best way to go about making a B2C product is to take continuous feedback. Often a high stealth mode product tends to deviate away from the actual requirements of the market and has the tendency to become something outlandish."

The idea alone would not be of much value without execution. Even if one copies your idea, the way you put it in use would be very different from the other person. "It is not the idea but the model of execution that you should guard," says Shukla. The best way to get idea validation done is to discuss it threadbare with your mentors, guides and friends. Launching a pilot before the full-fledged launch would also work well.

"It's crucial to constantly bounce your thoughts off with a committed team of mentors, who, given their experience, knowledge and network, can add value to define futuristic demands of the market, sounding out potential customers and fellow experts to bring in innovative ideas, iden-



By keeping your idea to yourself you run the risk of limiting yourself in almost every aspect of your venture, which eventually leads to a lot of changes, modifications, improvements after the launch and learning essential things after mistakes have been made.

— Dinesh Goel
Founder, Ideas Infinite

tifying and warning against critical technological loopholes, gaps in financial planning and potential implementation issues, etc, says Goel. He is thankful to his mentors (who include experts, scholars, practitioners, even competitors in some ways) who helped him enhance his vision, did not let him get complacent nor obsessed with his idea and even now constantly keep him on the fast track of the learning curve

While some people think that there are many who would not hesitate in stealing the idea, others believe that putting it out in the open is the best way to get it validated. In response to our question on LinkedIn, Jaap Schuddeboom, Entrepreneur Start-up Consultant and Coach based in The Netherlands, says "I'd even go so far as to suggest you



Ask when you are still brainstorming with potential customers or successful entrepreneurs and remember that unless you share, you cannot get a response.

**— S Nandakumar
President, Vinvision Holistic
Management Consulting**

promote a product/service on your Website of which only the outline is known, to find out if there is a need in the market for that." He adds that it saves a lot of product development time and money, and if the response is positive, you know that you spent time and money that is worthwhile

A section of the people who responded to how good is it to keep your ideas under wraps before the launch of the final product or service, felt that not all ideas should be brought out of the stealth mode and it depends also on the final product and its proprietary nature. According to Chicago-based Bruce Tincknell, MD and CEO of Just The Facts, "The real key is exposing it to a range of potential users in order to gauge the interest level. This is critical to do so that necessary refinements and adjustments can be made prior to launch. Focus groups are an excellent way of exposing and gaining insights and valuable feedback prior to market launch."

Even if you are able to keep your idea under wraps for a while, the big question is how long can you do it. You will have to bring it out in the market, sooner or later. But another angle here is competitive advantage. According to Brian Dorricott, Business Angel, based in Bristol, UK, "An entrepreneur whose only advantage is that no one has thought of it yet and the idea is easy to copy (and not protectable), then stealth mode may be the only option. However, at some point the entrepreneur will need to go public and at that point, someone may copy it and the copier may benefit from being second to market (i.e. learning from the mistakes of the first entrant)." Dorricott believes that the ideas that are difficult to copy or have their IP protected can easily be discussed with everyone. "They will need as much help as they can get and the best way to do this is to shout about it and network



When you validate, you have got to see who you validate your idea with; the best one is your prospective customer.

**— Vijay Shukla
Founder, Setu Ventures**

so people know. This can also help resolve early advice and funding problems--if the idea is that good, someone in the network will hear about it and become interested as a mentor and/or funder."

According to Dave Powell, MD of Texas-based SandOaks, "Many ideas need significant tweaking from customer feedback, so it becomes important to socialize the idea with customers, partners and employees early in the process." Goel says that one of the key aspect of this is to understand that you are essentially in stealth mode for the world because you don't throw your idea out in the open except to a few carefully selected people who are your bouncing board. Also it is critical to carefully select who you share the idea with because you want to ensure that your idea does not get hijacked or side-stepped or derailed.

So the next time you have a "great" idea, open it up for feedback and you would be surprised how fresh thoughts will make it more valuable. 