

matt jones

Interview – The Inventor, Art Fry

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The Art of creating a notable invention

Matt Jones talks to scientist and inventor Art Fry, father of the ubiquitous Post-it note, as he celebrates the product's 20th anniversary during a visit to the UAE.

Art Fry, the man who invented the stick-it-where-you-will Post-it note, has been stuck to his seat at Dubai's JW Marriott Hotel for two days, answering reporters' questions about his innovation with a patience and modesty so appealing they should be patented, too.

Fry, a scientist with 3M – the American company that gave the world Scotch tape in 1925 – is in the UAE as part of a world tour promoting Post-it on its 20th birthday.

The idea for self-adhesive notepaper came to him in 1977 when, as a member of a Minnesota choir, he decided that he needed page markers that would stick in his songbook and not fall out, leaving him scrambling to find his place.

“I don't know whether it was pure luck or inspiration,” says Iowa-born Fry, a 65-year-old grandfather, “but my mind began to wander and suddenly I thought of an adhesive which had been discovered years earlier by another 3M scientist, Dr Spencer Silver.”

Silver's adhesive had peculiar properties. It was weak, with “low tack”, but it was strong enough to hold, could be re-used and left no residue.

Fry was able to start work on adapting Silver's adhesive immediately thanks to a 3M policy known as “bootlegging”, in which scientists spend up to 15 per cent of their work time on projects of their own choosing – the idea being that people work hardest on projects they hold dearest.

Though a simple idea, it took him 18 months to refine the final product. The paper requires problematic multiple coating processes and the adhesive has to be so thin that the sticky part of the paper is not thicker than the rest, even when it is put into a pad.

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Once developed, the idea seemed to meet an unperceived need (the company's marketing department wanted to know what was wrong with paper clips and staples) but Fry eventually convinced his bosses that you could give anyone a Post-it note pad and they would know exactly what to do with it.

And so they did. After a successful test in the marketplace, they were introduced in the US in 1980 and in Europe a year later.

Fry's philosophy of invention is that you can make anything better but sometimes the public is not aware of the possibilities.

"Why guys like me are successful is not because we are brilliant or able to foresee things but because we have a vantage point that allows us to look at what the customer is trying to do, come up with new materials and say, 'Here's a way of doing it differently'," he says.

He likens inventors like himself to American footballers. "You don't throw the ball to the huddle where people are, but down field to where they're running to, so it's there ready for them when they arrive," he says.

Well, they've arrived. Now, says Fry, "Whether they are doctors, lawyers, teachers, secretaries or housewives, everyone thinks I invented Post-it note for them. Those same people have been partners in the innovation – innovation is not complete without people using it."

For a generation of young people, the Post-it note is no longer an innovation. Cheerfully, Fry tells of a mechanic working on his car who told his 10-year-old daughter who his customer was. "She said, 'My gosh, is he still alive?'" Fry relates with a chuckle.

His notes are now a familiar feature on the office landscape and are available just about everywhere in the world, as well as out of it – NASA astronauts use them in space.

Where possible, Fry follows, to meet and greet and sign pads for souvenir hunters. He visited the White House to receive the National Medal of Technology from President Bill Clinton, and, among other places, the invention has taken him back to Wales, the land of his great-great-grandfather, where 3M has a plant. After Dubai he will go to Istanbul.

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“I was just in the Kremlin the other day,” he says, with an accent reminiscent of characters in the film *Fargo*. “There was one stuck on the wall of the Kremlin! I don’t know what it was about because it was in Russian. It was quite an exciting thing.”

Fry recalls the first time he saw a stockpile of the notes after they first came off the production line at 3M’s Commercial Office Supply Division in Minnesota. “What a thrill,” he says. “I went to downtown St Paul and this one dealer had a whole display. I was down there taking pictures. It’s like having kids who become successful. As an inventor, I feel that developing a successful new product is about as close as you can come to achieving immortality.”

A company man through and through – he has been with 3M for 35 years; his business card says “Corporate Scientist” – Fry doesn’t regret not going it alone and becoming rich off his idea. The company’s resources, both material and human, were essential in Post-it’s development, he says.

When asked what other invention he would like to have had a hand in or what other inventor he admires, he replies: “A lot of the things Edison did. I would love to have been a part of his team. There was a lot of close collaboration. Assistants did much of the work. They kept separate. They lived off their own inventions. They weren’t taken over and told to do this or do that. 3M has the same sort of culture.”

And what inventions could we do without? “The ones we don’t need anymore,” he says, before taking the bull by the horns and highlighting the use of oil as a source of energy.

“Why not use oil as a raw material supply and find a different means of supplying energy?” he asks. “Probably Kuwait and other countries will run out. Should we address that now [his tone indicates that we should] and use oil to make plastics, fibres and things we need? There’s a lot of sunlight here, that’s a raw material. Why not spend money looking at some of these things now? Solar energy is a great place to start.”

Before I leave to return to the office, to Post-it note messages of missed phone-calls and new assignments, I ask Fry if there is anything he would like to say that hasn’t been covered. “I want to thank people who use Post-it notes,” he replies. “I’ve not met them and they’ve not met me but there is a tie between us. They are pioneers with me. They are part of this.”

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