

The Idea Thickening™ method for Business Ideas:

How to select winning ideas when most of the information is missing

Mark W. Wilson
585.281.2995

Initiatives consulting, LLC
mark@inititivesconsulting.com

Idea thickening is a methodology that can be applied to any complex, non-urgent decision. I have the most experience applying it to help people decide, “*Is this a good business idea?*”; specifically screening the very early stages of high-technology ideas. Idea Thickening involves some terminology and methods that are novel but at the core it is based upon established foundational building blocks.

The first building block is a belief that a **FINITE SET OF QUESTIONS** exists around our decision. If we knew the answers, we could be confident in making the best decision possible. There exists a huge cloud of expertise around business ideas. Business ideas are a well-studied field. There are hundreds of books and papers studying why some business ideas succeed and others fail, dissecting entrepreneurial characteristics, and providing business plan templates.

If one is wondering whether their idea has any merit, at first pass it might seem that there are *hundreds* of questions that must be answered. But preliminary study shows that the list of critical questions become redundant quite quickly—far short of hundreds of questions. In fact, many questions that challenge ideas are actually *repeating previous questions*—this time probing for *deeper* answers.

The second tenet is a tenacious belief that **TIME IS CRITICAL**. Because of the human condition

we all have limited time. As Jeffery Timmons has studied, the average person cannot simply try out a lot of startup company ideas. Similarly, established companies must be diligent in how they mete out “new ideas time” or today’s cash fuel dries up. Given abundant time, there is no need for Thickening; extensively investigate and pursue all ideas!

Of the elements in the innovation process, *time is easy to control and measure*. When 1 month has gone by, we know that 1 month has gone by. Similarly with 40 hours or 2 hours. There is no discussion about it. “*Time’s up. Put your pencils down!*”

Idea Thickening builds on the fact that we can control how much *total* time is spent trying to answer the questions, and how much time is spent on each *individual* question.

Idea Thickeners must salute Robert Cooper. About 25 years ago, Cooper conducted a 5-year study of new product development. He found that the most innovative companies used what he termed a **STAGE-GATE PROCESS** in controlling their commercialization. Stage-Gate methods are widely accepted as best practice today.

The challenge is that for high-technology ideas, the gates are very spread out and the deliverables are often not clear enough during the earliest stages. The opportunity to critically shape the idea during the concept stage is lost.

Thickening Matrix

		THICKENING LEVELS			
		<u>Level a</u>	<u>Level b</u>	• • •	<u>Level n</u>
		Basic Thickening	Intermediate Thickening		Final Thickening
THICKENING QUESTIONS	Question 1	Noun 1a	Noun 1b		Noun 1n
	Question 2	Noun 2a	Noun 2b		Noun 2n
	Question 3	Noun 3a	Noun 3b		Noun 3n
	⋮				
	Question N	Noun Na	Noun Nb		Noun Nn

An Idea Thickening™ Matrix has Time mapped out across the top in Thickening Levels. The Questions that need to be investigated run down the side. Auditable Nouns are clearly defined along the pathway.

The fourth element of Thickening involves “nouns”. I coined the term *Noun™ consulting* when I hung out my shingle 14 years ago. It means that everyone needs to understand the end deliverables that are being sought; and these deliverables need to be made as tangible and auditable as possible.

Thickening contends that AUDITABLE NOUNS appropriate to each level of early-concept investigation can be inserted into the matrix. In my experience with new product development and entrepreneurship, intermediate “nouns” are not clearly defined. Teams know what 2 years of work should produce but not what evidence will help next month’s decision-to-proceed.

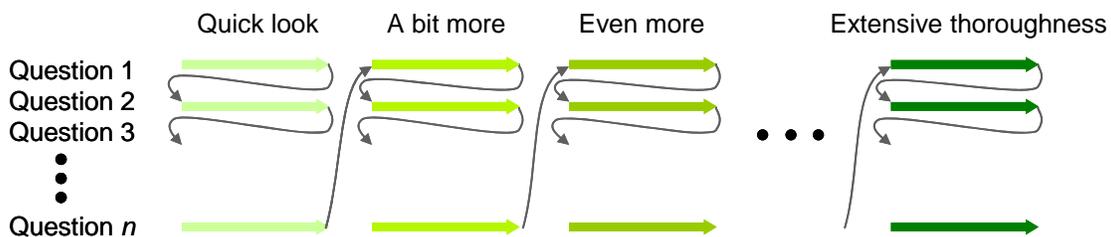
For example, one critical question asked of business ideas is, “Will anyone buy this?” After products are launched the answer is appropriately measured by looking at sales numbers for the past 3 years. When initially pondered, ideas may be several years away from actual sales data. However, this sales channel can be *thinned* backwards to auditable nouns that do indicate an appropriate thickness level all the way back into the concept stages. Thin nouns that are having a hard time being completed are trying to talk! Perhaps the idea is not worth pursuing...or not worth being pursued *in the manner* it is currently moving forward.



Clear and auditable nouns are paramount to proper go/no-go decisions and idea shaping

Idea Thickening requires starting out with many ideas. This does not mean that all the ideas have to be completely different. In fact, they can be MULTIPLE RENDITIONS of the same idea. Renditions come about by considering different target markets, technical specifications, feature sets, degrees of vertical integration, pricing, and distribution strategies. To properly Thicken, each rendition is purposefully investigated on par with competing renditions; and only the best continue. *Thickeners believe there are no “bad ideas”; only “bad renditions”.*

The final aspect of Idea Thickening has to do with the INCREMENTAL PATHWAY that is used to pursue answers. Small, uniform thickening will yield *better answers sooner* than spending too much time on one question. Ideas are often matured in a lopsided manner that stunts their success. As certain channels become quite thick, they make critical shaping from thinner channels difficult. “Obvious” information from these channels is avoided or glazed over because “it’s too late.”



Do not over-thicken any one channel of investigation

If one believes in these 6 building blocks, then it is not a stretch to support the punch line of Idea Thickening: Venture Capital groups, Vice Presidents of R&D, Directors of Business Development, and savvy entrepreneurs have *a lot of control* over how they take ideas through the innovation process. It is my hypothesis that optimal concept-stage settings exist around these variables that drastically improve the success rate of start-up companies and new product development. An optimized process does a better job of eliminating the bad ideas very early and shaping the remaining ideas to increase their probability of success.

Innovators have a lot of control over how they thicken their ideas. Critically shaping ideas very early maximizes their probability of success.