

What is a LEAD User?



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Numerous innovations fail. There are [many](#) reasons for this. Unfortunately, however, they are only known when a great deal of work, money and effort has already gone into the invention. However, if [LEAD Users are involved in the development process](#), the risk of failure is greatly reduced. This is shown by [studies](#), practice and many successful inventions that users have helped to think up and implement. But what is a LEAD User?

LEAD Users act out of self-interest

LEAD Users are advanced users or users who deal with a problem very intensively even in a certain area. The term was coined by the economist and professor at the [MIT Sloan School of Management](#), [Eric von Hippel](#), in the late 1980s. Hippel discovered at the time that it wasn't the manufacturers themselves, but the users who were responsible for important innovations. According to Eric von Hippel, each LEAD User has [two characteristics](#):

- LEAD Users already have needs or requirements that other market participants, such as [early adopters](#), will have some time later.
- LEAD Users benefit greatly from an innovation. Some of them are already working on it themselves.

LEAD Users can be individuals, [experts](#), companies or organizations. But do not confuse LEAD Users with [pilot customers](#) or [beta users](#). They take a closer look at existing developments in order to improve the final result. LEAD Users, on the other hand, are used much earlier in the innovation process and make a much more important contribution: they design the innovation together with a manufacturer or in some cases autonomously at all.



Varnishing instead of typing again

[Bette Nesmith Graham](#) is a good example of this. In the 1950s, after her divorce, she worked for Texas Bank and Trust as a secretary to support herself and her son Michael. That was when the first electric typewriters came onto the market, and Mrs. Nesmith Graham had her problems with them. Because the keystroke was much smoother than with the mechanical devices, it made a lot of typos. Unfortunately, erasing didn't work without ugly marks on the paper either. Bette Nesmith therefore independently mixed a paper-coloured varnish and applied it whenever she made another typing mistake. She could then type over the dried liquid instead of writing the entire document again completely. Bette Nesmith Graham called her invention "[Mistake Out](#)" and wanted to sell it to IBM. But the company shows no interest. After all, thanks to its innovation, now patented under the name "Liquid Paper", it was able to stay afloat after the bank was terminated in 1958. In 1979, Gillette Corporation bought Liquid Paper Corporation for nearly \$48 million.

Tinkering is a popular sport

Mrs. Nesmith Graham may be an individual case with her business success. However, fiddling to improve equipment is a mass phenomenon. Eric von Hippel proved this in a [study](#) he conducted among almost 1200 British consumers in 2010. As a result, over six percent of consumers invest time and money to improve existing equipment. These expenditures add up to a sum that is almost one and a half times greater than the total investment that the British economy spends on innovation each year. The desire to invent is therefore a popular sport.

Invented by users: Mountain bike, WorldWideWeb and Gatorade

On closer inspection, many innovations turn out to be inventions made by users and not by the development departments of companies. Here are some prominent examples:

1. The mountain bike was invented by a group of young hippies who risked their heads and collars for a little glory in sunny California at notorious [repack races](#). Gary Fisher, Charles Kelly, Joe Breeze and Tom Ritchey developed the first mountain bikes from the sports bikes from the 1930s with their heavy steel frames, thick tires and ineffective drum brakes. In 1981 [Specialized](#) was the first manufacturer to start series production (Stumpjumper model).

2. The World Wide Web is also the development of a user: [Tim Berners Lee](#) solved a problem of his employer, the European Organization for Nuclear Research ([CERN](#)): Part of the laboratories are located on French territory, another part on Swiss territory, each with different network infrastructures. This made the exchange of information extremely difficult. Berners Lee then developed the page description language [HTML](#), the transfer protocol [HTTP](#), the [URL](#) and the first [web browser](#) and [web server](#). This package allows the worldwide exchange of information between sciences. This solved the communication problems between the CERN laboratories - and laid the foundation for the [World Wide Web](#).
3. The sports drink [Gatorade](#) is also an invention of users. In the mid-60s, the fitness of some players on the Florida University American football team, the [Florida Gators](#), suffered so much from the heat that the co-coach asked some university doctors for help. They found that electrolytes and carbohydrates, which the athletes had lost through sweating, were inadequately replaced. The scientists then mixed a drink called [Gatorade](#) to make up for this deficiency - and behold, the Florida Gators even [won the Gator Bowl in 1969](#).

Conclusion - Definition: What is a LEAD User?

Many companies still assume that only they alone develop the best innovations and bring them to market maturity. Market researchers identify needs and engineers develop products to meet these needs. As Eric von Hippel points out in an interview with the German business magazine "brand eins", three quarters of inventions made in this traditional way end up as a flop. The scientist literally says: "Manufacturers may have outstanding technical expertise, but lead users have outstanding needs that motivate them to look for suitable solutions. The underlying method is called the [LEAD User Method](#). LEAD Users can also be extremely valuable for your business. Why exactly, you can read in this [blog post](#).

Photo by Austin Distel, Unsplash.