

They Said It Couldn't Be Done

Introduce a new idea and the world beats a path to your door, right? Not really. As Mark Twain once said, "The man with a new idea is a crank until the idea succeeds."

Case in point: the Perspective this past Monday that related how a newspaper editor in 1872 lambasted the concept of the telephone, and that if such an invention were possible, "it would be of no practical value."

For every person who is open to innovation and change, there are probably a thousand who would vote in favor of the status quo. If you think great ideas are welcomed with open arms, think again. Some examples:

- New Jersey farmers rejected the first successful cast-iron plow in 1797. They believed the cast iron would poison the land and stimulate weeds.
- With the advent of railroads, one prominent citizen proclaimed they would create the need for more insane asylums to house all those who were driven mad by the noise and terrified by the size of the trains.
- Trains fared no better in Europe. German "experts" predicted that if passenger trains traveled faster than 15 miles per hour, the passengers would get nosebleeds.
- When George Westinghouse tried to interest Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt to invest in his new air brakes for trains, he was rebuffed. "I have not time to waste on fools," said the wealthy Vanderbilt.
- Robert Fulton was a bit luckier in attracting investors who provided funds to build his steamboat, which he completed in 1807. The investors had one stipulation, though. They demanded that their names be secret lest the world laugh at them for being part of such a foolhardy project.
- In 1881, New York women refused to learn how to type. They were afraid that the strain of typing would be too much for them.
- In the mid-1800s, farmers tore down miles of telegraph wire, fearful that the new-fangled invention would disturb the weather and ruin crops.
- When G.G. Hubbard learned of his future son-in-law's invention, he called it "only a toy." His daughter was engaged to a young man named Alexander Graham Bell.
- Darryl F. Zanuck of 20th Century Fox thought television was just a passing fancy. In 1946, he said, "Video won't be able to hold any market after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night."
- In 1943, one of IBM's experts, Thomas J. Watson, predicted that "there is a world market for about five computers."

Got a new idea? Don't be discouraged if people don't jump all over it with enthusiasm.

– Beecher Hunter