



## Stanford eCorner

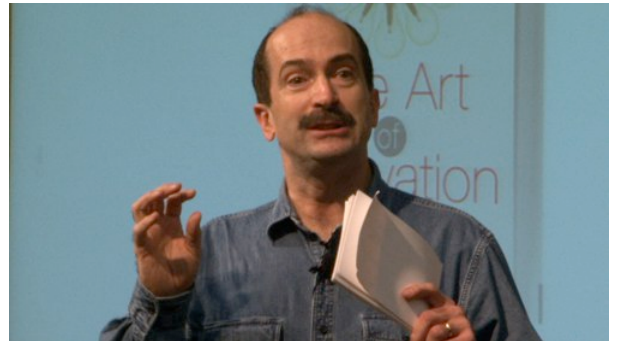
### Field Observations with Fresh Eyes

Tom Kelley, *IDEO*

November 12, 2008

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2100/Field-Observations-with-Fresh-Eyes>

IDEO's General Manager, Tom Kelley, shares a case study demonstrating value opportunities that arise when designers, innovators, and entrepreneurs see with fresh eyes. He cites his company's challenge to design a new children's toothbrush. Rather than relying on industry assumptions, his team did hands-on field research and discovered new ideas on how children actually go about brushing their teeth. Subsequently, IDEO's new take on an old product became a bestseller for their client, and caused an industry-wide re-design by other toothbrush manufacturers.



#### Transcript

About 10 years ago we got approached by one of the largest oral healthcare companies in America. A company you've probably heard of called Oral-B. And they said, "Look, we'd like a new kid's toothbrush because ours is starting to get commoditized. It looks like a lot of kid's toothbrushes out there and you can't have that. We want to be special." So we say, "OK. We'll do this. We want to go out in the field and do some field research." And they're kind of not sure about that, like it's not rocket science, we're talking about kids brushing their teeth, how hard can that be? They would really like us to stop fooling around and start designing. But we want to go through this process, this observation process because we think almost always you can spot opportunities. And so we go out and we're on like the first day of observations and we make a small discovery. The small discovery we make is that every kid's toothbrush in the history of the world has had the same implicit assumption.

It's a logical assumption it just isn't exactly right which is the assumption always was parents have big hands. Kids have small hands. And so when you want to make the kid's version, make it like the parent's brush only smaller and skinnier. Perfectly logical - until you go out in the field, until you actually watch humans, little tiny humans, brushing their teeth. And what you notice right away, you get a five-year-old boy brushing his teeth, he's not holding his toothbrush in his fingertips the way mom and dad do; he's fisting it. He's holding it like this because he doesn't have the dexterity. He doesn't have the fine motor controls that his parents have and so he's got to hold it like this. In fact, the other thing he does is he holds the brush too far up very frequently and so he's punching himself in the face as he's trying to brush his teeth. And we solve that problem too but the main thing was, came back from the field and said, "Uh-oh! Kids don't need little skinny toothbrushes. Kids need big fat toothbrushes.

Let's make a big fat squishy toothbrushes." And you may have noticed, now every toothbrush company in the world makes these. But our client reports that after we made that little tiny discovery out in the field, sitting in a bathroom watching a five-year-old boy brush his teeth, they had the best selling kid's toothbrush in the world for 18 months. So when you think about power, when you think about credibility, if you can go out in the field and do that observation and come up with that finding and your company, your organization was the best in its field for 18 months afterwards, would that be worth it? I think that would be worth it. And so that's this message about think like a traveler, be an anthropologist. Use your powers of observation. Have that part of your brain turned up as high as you can all along.