# Red Button Design

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# Design against Dependency - A Case Study on Red Button Design

Based on the original Japanese model, the Dragon's Den television programme is the ultimate marketing gimmick. It's a familiar format; business models are pitched to investors, who play the cold-hearted, money-minded business tycoons. All of the required investment must be reached, or none is given at all. Regardless of immediate success, entrants are given a vast stage on which to demonstrate their ideas to the masses. This kind of thing makes good television. Red Button Design's 2007 pitch) is where the gimmick met reality. The pitch can be viewed here **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VeqrPQumhA**

The show provided a profound marketing opportunity for both Red Button Design, and for the 'dragons' themselves. Peter Jones described the pitch as the 'first real Dragons Den philanthropy investment'. As such, all parties gained from the agreed investment (each 'Dragon' agreed to put in £10,000, in exchange for 2% each, and a vast increase in charitable kudos for their own personal brands). Following the programme however, Red Button Design were offered a £45,000 grant by Oxford University's Saïd Business School, allowing them to hold on to the entirety of the business for themselves. Since then the pair have spent £300,000 (as of 2011) developing the product, and the sixth version is in use in communities all over sub-Saharan Africa.

This study looks at Red Button Design's breakthrough product, the Midomo Water Purifier (previously ROSS); its beginnings as a user-led innovation of profound potential, and its development and implementation into varying complex circumstances. It will also explore the intriguing marketing strategy implemented by co-founder Amanda Leon-Joyce, and the wider normalisation of pro-profit charitable entrepreneurship.

The Reverse Osmosis Sanitation System, known as the Midomo Water Purifier, was a 3 in 1 water transportation, storage and filtration system. Powered by the rotation of the wheels, the Midomo purifies water by forcing it through pores small enough to allow only the water molecules through. Users are able to visit the nearest water source, rather than walk the 5 to 10km to avoid contaminate heavy open water sources. From there, the user can easily transport the water they have collected (up to 50 litres), rather than struggling with the much lesser amount that they were able to carry. By the time they get back to their home destination, the motion of the transportation will have purified the water.

A short video showing the Midomo in action can be viewed here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4oYmmdaVrw.

Startlingly simple, the Midomo is an example of user-led innovation. As described in Red Button Design's Dragon's Den pitch, alternative implementations of clean water systems such as standpipes often operate through the constant introduction of cleaning chemicals to the water supply. If the chemicals cannot be delivered, the supply will become contaminated again. Such systems can be installed for £1000 to £2000, and take approximately six months to implement. In areas of particular social and political complexity, these factors can make such options hazardous and potentially harmful. End users are markedly exempt from the process, and particularly at risk should the process be interrupted. The Midomo puts the end user in a position of control; each Midomo filter should last at least a year, and should it stop working, the Midomo will dye the water to warn the user not to drink it. Replaceable filters can then be purchased.

Not only does the Midomo benefit communities through the implementation of clean drinking water, it also affects other vital social metrics. Clean drinking water results in the reduction of hospitalisations due to diarrheal illness, freeing up medical resources for the treatment of more serious conditions. The reduction in time needed to collect water allocates time to children and women to attend school, take part in enterprise and promote economic growth in the area. The avoidance of cleansing chemicals to the water supply protects soil chemistry and local agriculture from potential disruption.

Co-founder Amanda Leon-Joyce set out Red Button Design's code of practice, termed 'Design against Dependency'. She believed that Midomo, and by extension, Red Button Design's other product offerings, must be:

- designed specifically for the humanitarian sector, rather than the common practise of adapting technology from medical or military innovation.
- able to address multiple related problems in a single product purchase, maximising value.
- designed to be easier to use and maintain than existing products.
- environmentally preferable to existing solutions.
- deployed using a business model designed around NGOs: keeping donor funds in the community for longer, maximising ‘benefit for spend’, and promoting community independence.
- designed for local assembly, allowing a regional variation in product design which maximises Midomo’s utility and acceptance to users, whilst also supporting NGOs to achieve their targets promoting local employment and economic growth.

This manifesto touches on the bottom up innovation model utilised by Red Button Design, and in it, Leon-Joyce posits the value of autonomy to positive social enterprise. By demanding a small fee for a product, a feedback loop is created and collaboration is encouraged. By all accounts the Midomo can be locally manufactured and assembled, and therefore, locally maintained. The dependency cycle is cut out of the equation.

Red Button Design described itself as 'pro-profit'. As Leon-Joyce describes 'We are absolutely staunchly for profit,' she says, 'The five or six guys in Ghana who are helping to fabricate the parts there will have

shareholdings and get dividends'. Leon-Joyce describes Red Button Design's policy as akin to Divine chocolate and Cafe Direct, both of whom seem now to operate eminently sensible business models. However, Leon-Joyce describes the attitudes regarding such social enterprise as remarkably pessimistic. Such businesses operate a tightrope in that charity funds are uneasy unless you have charity status, and venture capitalists assume that general benevolence equals a small return. The public awareness of businesses such as Red Button Design, Cafe Direct and Divine chocolate will, one assumes, generate a growing understanding of the peculiar position they negotiate.

By entering into the Dragon's Den competition, Red Button Design gave themselves a platform upon which investment could be sourced. The Co-founders, James Brown and Amanda Leon-Joyce separated their roles; broadly, Brown designed the product and Leon-Joyce marketed it. Certainly, without the unusual public presence attained through Dragon's Den, the pair would have taken longer to find suitable investment. Similar PR projects included a collaboration with the high profile jewellery designer, Alex Monroe.

Both founders went on to work on new projects. Leon-Joyce founded Irreverent Dance, 'a growing dance studio countering students' negative experiences of social exercise by offering a body-positive, non-gendered, community approach to dance'. Brown worked as a Public Health Engineer with Oxfam. As with many innovations in this space they were unable to move the product to scale to the point where it became self-supporting. But it serves as a good example of both user-led, bottom up innovation, appropriately marketed through non-linear methods, and a formula for pro-profit social entrepreneurship that may lead the way in our understanding of how we implement humanitarian innovation in the future.

You can read Red Button Design's blog here: http://redbuttondesign.blogspot.co.uk/