
Taking the Leap: Two Moments of Innovation Truth

By Hal Gregersen

Though I'm not a fan of overdosed caffeine and sugar-laden concoctions, I give complete kudos to Felix Baumgartner and the Red Bull Stratos team for their successful sky dive—or rather, space dive—from beyond the edge of the Earth and back, breaking the sound barrier in the process. From start to finish, Felix and his team pushed the envelope by taking experimentation to the extreme.

Long ago Shakespeare wrote, “thoughts are but dreams till their effect be tried.” Testament to this citation, Felix tried more than 1,000 different ways to figure out how to break the speed of sound in a space suit and ultimately, one worked. The effects of all those experiments were truly tested in a no-turning-back moment: an **833-mph** unbridled descent before Felix pulled the parachute cord and caught his breath.

The best innovators around the world, whether working in the stratosphere like Felix or the regular atmosphere like the rest of us, **rapidly experiment** to create surprising new solutions. They doggedly try and try again to make something work. For Felix to succeed, his team had to transform countless ideas into prototypes before finding the right solutions to mission-critical problems. None of the team's key inventions—from the less-than-paper-thin balloon skin to the completely customized tin-can launching pod to a fully pressurized spacesuit ready to withstand the violent buffetings that occur when breaking the sound barrier—were successful the first time around. Each took iteration after iteration to get it right. However, the team members' collective dream to break the sound barrier in a pressurized suit kept the iterations going until solid, workable solutions finally surfaced.

To uncover these remedies, Felix and his team tapped not only top science experts who were familiar with the unknowns they were facing, but also

someone with actual experience hurtling from space to Earth with only a parachute on his back. Eighty-four-year-old **Joe Kittinger** was the only person on Earth who had come even close to jumping the same distance successfully. Joe's personal experience, combined with his octogenarian wisdom, gave Felix solid emotional and behavioral backup during key parts of his ascent and record-breaking descent.

Watching Felix jump out of his space capsule and successfully break the sound barrier took my breath away. I can't imagine what it did to him. If I were he, I would have had two moments of terror. The first was that initial decision to jump. In his case, he had no option, as the balloon could only go up, and he would have to go down. Nevertheless, that crucial moment of decision when Felix faced the final step into the unknown must have caused at least a little gulp, if not a big one. The second breathtaking moment was when he broke through the sound barrier and started to spin, almost out of control. From the outside, all you could do was pray that somehow he could right himself and get in the safe, head-down position once again.

Any innovator taking an idea forward into the world faces these two moments of truth—and the bolder the innovation, the greater these moments. The first is that **“stepping on the edge” moment**, when so much work has gone into a new idea and it's now time to push the button and see what happens. Here is where the hundreds or thousands of experiments done to find the right solution give a person the confidence to take the leap. Take Nick Woodman, founder of **GoPro**, who started with a surfer's dream of “going pro” by having an on-board camera take professional action shots of his “performance.” After hundreds of experiments with different camera components along the coasts of Australia, he finally took to market a camera that did the “going pro” just right.

The second moment of truth is when the launch has occurred, and yet things still start to spin out of control. Statistician George Box once said, “The only way to know how a complex system will behave after you change it is to change it and see how it behaves.” Such is the nature of any innovation. You don't quite know what will happen along the way when innovations go forward, but rest assured, something will happen. Again, that's when the **power of experimentation** can reorient the innovation down a positive, productive path. For the past 10 years, **Woodman and his GoPro team** have done just that, engaged in constant experimentation not only to make the camera better (moving from film to digital to video), but also to make it

work perfectly in markets beyond the surfer’s domain—think fast cars, scuba divers, and skiers, and the list continues. They call it “continually resetting” the product to make it better and better and doing the jobs people want the camera to do. In fact, GoPro has advanced so much due to experimentation that it was used by Felix during his epic [space jump](#).

So what do you do when standing at the edge of a launch? What do you do when the innovation is launched but facing stiff challenges? One way to live each moment of innovation truth better is to leverage the power of experimentation before the fearful step into the unknown is taken—and to rely on its power again as the innovation takes on a life of its own. Journey well.

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