

CRAIN'S

CHICAGO BUSINESS.

CHICAGOBUSINESS.COM | SEPTEMBER 12, 2011

CAN INNOVATION BE TAUGHT?

Yes, and sometimes your customer can be the best teacher

STORIES BY SAMANTHA STAINBURN

This is an excerpt from the original article.

In 1983, Steve Rundell launched Solvent Systems International Inc., an Elk Grove Village company that helped clients like auto body shops and dry cleaners reduce chemical waste. Solvent's chemical-washing process separated chlorinated solvents into liquid that could be reused and solids for disposal, typically reducing waste by 80%.

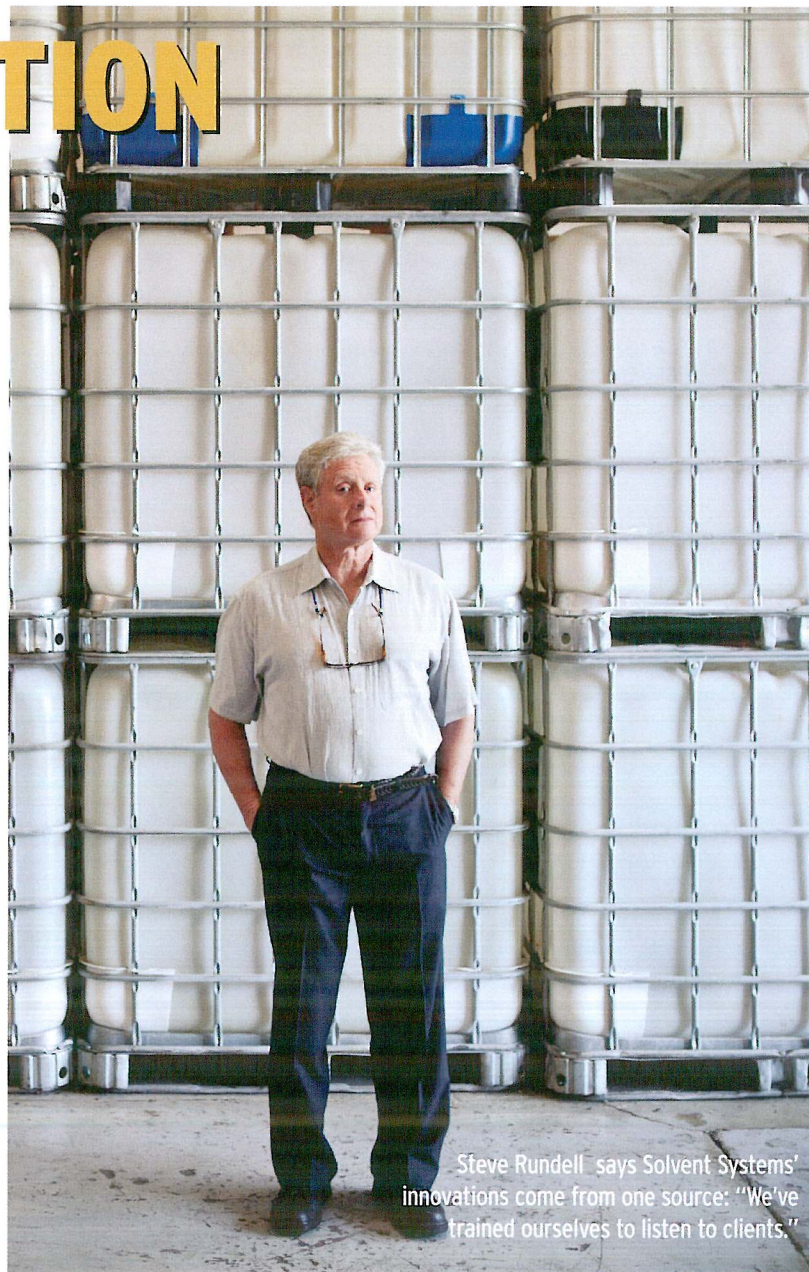
At the time, federal environmental regulations charged companies for chemical waste they shipped offsite, even if the chemicals were being sent to a distilling plant that would reduce the waste. Mr. Rundell anticipated that the new rules were going to cost small businesses a lot of money. So he designed two trucks that took his technology to clients' locations and distilled their chemicals onsite. His hunch was right: The business took off.

Since then, Solvent Systems has moved into new areas. It makes biodegradable industrial cleaning products, runs a used-cooking-oil collection service, turns that cooking-oil waste into cleaning products and collects, melts and reuses the metal dust that piles up on factory floors. All this innovating has helped Solvent grow into a \$5-million business with 20 employees.

How has the company come up with new ideas?

"We've trained ourselves to listen to clients," says Mr. Rundell, who's now in his 60s. "It's an everyday activity for us."

In other words, by expressing their unmet needs, your customers are drawing a blueprint for what could be your next venture—if you're smart enough to hear it and creative enough to come up with a solution.



Steve Rundell says Solvent Systems' innovations come from one source: "We've trained ourselves to listen to clients."

JOHN R. BOEHM

As Mr. Rundell puts it, "If you're not looking at how you can evolve your business to solve more of your clients' needs, you're not going to remain in business in these changing times."

So how can you fine-tune your ability to sense customers' problems and make innovation part of your company's daily routine?

Contact Steve at srundell@solvent-systems.com or at 847 - 437 -1100 extensi