



Much More than an Invention: Changing Agriculture

Cyrus McCormick introduced better farm equipment, the McCormick Reaper, and changed the agriculture industry and the economy of the city of Chicago. This machine would enable a farmer to harvest crops much more quickly than the farmers could do with horse-drawn equipment.

When Cyrus McCormick showed his reaper to people, many thought it was a joke. The London Times called it “a cross between an Astley chariot, a wheelbarrow, and a flying machine.” And in the mid-1800s, you can imagine how believable a flying machine was. While people laughed at his idea, McCormick kept working on it.

Yet by 1859, McCormick’s firm had sold more than 50,000 reapers. Why did Cyrus McCormick’s invention succeed? He succeeded because he figured out how to make the invention work well and how to help people understand how it could help them. He was a successful business entrepreneur. A business entrepreneur starts a new kind of business or changes the way businesses work.

To succeed, an invention must work. That may sound very simple, but it is an idea that not every inventor has recognized. Here is a report Cyrus McCormick wrote about his project.

From the experiment in 1831 until the harvest of 1840, I did not sell a single reaper, except one, which I afterwards took back... Experience proved to me that it was best for the public, as well as myself, that no sales were made, as defects presented themselves which would have made the reaper unprofitable in other hands... I was not sufficiently satisfied of its being a ‘useful’ machine, to patent the reaper, until the year 1834, its construction and proportions having been imperfect, requiring much effort to make them, while light, yet simple, strong, and durable.

An invention does not introduce itself; the entrepreneur must find ways to introduce it effectively so that people will recognize its usefulness. Cyrus McCormick originated two new ways of selling:

- He gave a written guarantee with every machine
- He set one price—until then, a seller might change the price at different times.

An innovation that is introduced in one city can affect people in places far beyond that city’s limits—as well as the city’s economy. McCormick’s factory brought jobs directly and indirectly, as Chicago dock workers and railroad workers loaded more and more reapers for shipment to farms. Those reapers would change the farm industry throughout the Midwest and beyond. Without the magical grain machinery that gives us cheap bread, the whole new structure of our civilization ... would be withered by the blight of Famine.” [Herbert N. Casson, 1908.]

CCSSR2 Competence: Identify information that supports a concept.

Write one of these concepts next to the part or parts that are examples of this concept. Underline the sentences that support that concept.

collaboration

grit

innovation