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# Radio Flyer, And The Benefits Of Doing What You Love



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Innovation consultants and other professional strategists wield an impressive array of methods and tools for the discovery of marketplace opportunities. Even in this age of big data, however, no level of analytical wizardry will ever come close to the potency of a founder's creativity, vision and zeal.

To better understand the vital role of instincts, emotion and other decidedly qualitative elements in innovation and new venture formation, in this the first installment of my "Origin Stories" series here, let us go back-- 100 years back-- to the foundation of Radio Flyer, the toy company today best known for its iconic "little red wagon."

Radio Flyer is a rags-to-riches story that is quintessentially American. And human.

The company was founded in Chicago by a young Italian immigrant named Antonio Pasin, a cabinet craftsman and a generalist "maker" almost a century before the latter term became trendy.



Radio Flyer recently celebrated its 100th anniversary. RADIO FLYER

As an impoverished child back in the old country, Pasin would often pass the days imagining—and then building—his own toys in order to transport his mind to another, more idyllic world. As an adult and newly-minted American, Pasin made it his mission to help other kids similarly engage their own imaginations. This mission still presides at the company today.

(For more about Radio Flyer's history, go to my [podcast interview](#) with Robert Pasin, Antonio's grandson and Radio Flyer's current CEO)

In every way, Pasin's creations were acts of love; for his consumers for sure, but also love for his own craft and trade. As a reflection of its founder, this deep sense of a higher purpose not only propelled Radio Flyer to initial success, it also helped the company successfully pivot through many inevitable challenges it would face over a century to follow. Feeling—not analysis—was and remains the driver.

Of course, feeling drove not only what Radio Flyer did, but how it did it, leading to a design aesthetic that is distinctive and compelling to this day. With products marked by such elegantly simple curves and that unmistakable shade of red that is now practically its own Pantone color, Radio Flyer embodies the sentiments expressed by Willie Davidson, scion of another vehicle company (yes, the one that makes motorcycles): “Form follows function, but both report to emotion.”

Today's entrepreneurs in all verticals – and especially corporate “intrapreneurs” —can learn a lot from Antonio Pasin and the founding DNA of Radio Flyer. Here are three of what I'll call “little red lessons”:

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**1. Do what you love.** A deep belief in your work and the inherent value you are creating for your customers must preside over your decision-making process, not dispassionate analysis. If you don't love what you're doing, then the market won't either.

**2. Establish a purpose,** and stick to it. Pasin was driven by a powerful, well-articulated sense of resolve, rooted in a simple observation about human behavior. Before even worrying about the what, make sure you have a good why. Your purpose should be able to withstand the test of time, as it has for Radio Flyer.

**3. Embrace beauty in design.** Radio Flyer's products were and remain gorgeous. In today's age of mindboggling technical progress, we must not forget about the power of aesthetics in design, which accesses consumer psychology much more deeply than the tactile benefits of product features.

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Innovation leaders today, especially in large corporations, sometimes overcook the strategic planning process. I'm a fan of strategy ex-post facto: establish a lofty purpose rooted in love and human insights, express that purpose through creative work that amazes, and whatever unfolds from there... that's your strategy. This approach has worked for Radio Flyer and could apply to virtually any company in any vertical at any time.

Amongst other festive acts to celebrate its 100th anniversary last month, the Radio Flyer company graced a prominent plaza in downtown Chicago with what the Guinness Book of World Records declared to be the largest wagon on the planet. This not-very-little red wagon, designed in perfect proportion to the original, is almost 30 feet long, and weighs over 15,000 pounds (imagine how many kids you can take down to the ice cream parlor in that one).

The big wagon is an appropriate symbol of a big idea, still salient a century later. We should all aspire to achieve such impact, and can if we do what we love.