

1. Lessons on innovation from a Soweto street vendor



By [Douglas Kruger](#)

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Take the off-ramp near Soweto, stop at just the right place, and you will meet a man who runs an unusual food stall. It isn't part of any retail chain you've ever heard of and there's nothing quite like it anywhere else in the world...

You start the process by ordering a bunny chow. His interpretation of this meat-within-a-bread loaf concept includes a mix of polony, eggs, tomato sauce, and assorted odds and ends, the nature of which varies from day to day. Best not to ask too many questions.



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Once you've got your bunny chow, you can pay and walk off. Or, if you ask nicely, you can have it run over.

Choose the latter, and the man will wrap it in wax paper, hurl it onto the highway and wait for a truck to drive over it at 120 kph.

Once retrieved, the opened package will be transformed. It will now be a colourful mush of mingled parts - eggs dripping with sauce, polony interspersed with shredded bread, making kaleidoscopic patterns that defy description. The packaging will have tyre marks across it.

As you leave the roadside stall, take a moment to reflect on the vast number of principles you can learn from this man. His business is the definition of what I term a 'unique signature'. He is a fascinating study in how innovation is not necessarily driven by the classic solve-a-problem approach, which economics-minded textbooks and professors would have us believe is the primary driver of innovation. What 'problem' does running over a defenceless polony actually solve?

This vendor has added theatre to his offering and tinkered with the core essence of an industry. He is an unknowing advocate for the notion that innovation is not the preserve of highly funded technology giants, but can be carried out by alert, switched-on human beings in any situation, who are simply looking around at their environments. He is an argument in favour of performance as part of process, and he shows us that innovation need not only mean developing a new app.

But, perhaps most fascinatingly, he shows us that true business innovation requires a little more than the ability to come up with a new concept, because this man is not wealthy - and he could be. There are elements, which could easily be added, that are missing from his business.

Let's take a hypothetical example of what he might do. Soweto is a popular international tourist destination. Families and businesspeople from America, the UK, Germany and Japan book to go on tours of Soweto - often to the bemusement of the average Soweto resident - as something of a meaningful spiritual pilgrimage.

Our local chef's run-over bunny chow could, I believe, qualify as the single biggest talking point among those international tourists returning to their home countries. It could be the defining experience of their South African tour - if only they knew that he even existed. Can't you just picture Hans waxing lyrical to his family in Hamburg about the crazy run-over meal he had near Soweto?

Like many small South African entrepreneurs, our protagonist is sitting on a gold mine but has no idea how to sell it or scale it up. Moreover, as the sole worker at his little stand, he has created a 'job' for himself, and not a business.

There is innovation running in his veins, but he doesn't quite know how to turn it into real wealth. And yet, the gap is smaller than even he might know. He simply requires a little more education about business innovation, and the next steps to take.

What do you need? I guarantee you it isn't the backing of Apple or BMW. It isn't government permission or a four-year university course.

In a series of upcoming articles, I will unpack the practical ways in which you can innovate in your business, and become wealthy as a result. The lessons are taken from my new book, *Relentlessly Relevant - 50 Ways to Innovate*, which looks at both international and quintessentially South African businesses and brands for examples of great (and poor) innovation. My goal is to help you to make your inner bunny-chow salesman wealthy and world-famous.

This year, let's make *you*, your business and your brand relentlessly relevant.

ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

Douglas Kruger is the bestselling author of nine business books with Penguin, including the global release: *Virus-Proof Your Small Business*. Meet him at www.douglaskruger.com or email info@douglaskrugerspeaker.com

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