

# Your next innovation breakthrough probably won't come from social media.

**Author :** Matt Palmquist

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## For New Product Design, “Likes” Can Lead You Astray

“It’s really hard to **design products** by focus groups,” [Steve Jobs once famously said](#). “A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.”

Social media is the ultimate focus group — **Twitter and Facebook** users rarely hesitate to voice their opinions. But although these sites have reshaped the way people communicate, they have a long way to go before they can help companies design and perfect new products. In fact, a new [study](#) finds that input from social media is more distracting than beneficial during the product development process, reinforcing the Jobsian perspective that companies probably shouldn’t invite consumers to the drawing board.

The study’s authors surveyed executives and engineers at nearly 200 firms from various industries, including **aerospace, IT, and consumer electronics**. The participants described which technologies they used during the innovation process — such as fax machines, social media, or cloud-hosted file-sharing platforms — and provided evidence about how these tools affected the speed and quality of their product rollouts.

The innovation cycle requires collaboration on **budgets, design, prototyping, and product testing**, which in turn demands the problem-solving skills of many departments, the strategic commitment of R&D resources, and external **communication** with distributors and suppliers. In short, innovation entails using the full range of **IT** capabilities — and in the hashtag era, this can also mean keeping customers and clients abreast of products on the assembly line and inviting their participation in design and marketing campaigns.

And yet, the authors found that older technologies still worked best. Teams that relied on email, computer-assisted design software, and desktop programs like **Microsoft Office** reported higher levels of collaboration, churned out more concepts and prototypes, and received better evaluations from their managers. Clearly, the tried-and-true nature of these IT tools means employees are comfortable with their functionality.

Internal wikis and cloud-based file-sharing systems also contributed positively to new product

development — especially among team members who are separated by countries or time zones.

Social networking sites such as **blogs, Facebook, and Twitter**, however, proved a hindrance, allowing customers and managers to weigh in too frequently and steer projects down blind alleys. “We tried [using a social network], but after several days we stopped using it because it was annoying,” one project manager told the authors. “The constant alerts and notifications were a bit much.”

**Source:** “[Do Social Media Tools Impact the Development Phase? An Exploratory Study](#),” by Tucker J. Marion, Gloria Barczak (both of Northeastern University), and Erik Jan Hultink (Delft University of Technology), *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, Dec. 2014, vol. 31, S1Feedback via social media may be able to help some projects, but at this point, the authors note, “a common frustration is the initial high expectations given to these tools only to be followed by strong dissatisfaction as the integrity of the system erodes, ultimately becoming a cumbersome collection of outdated information.”