

# Smarter Innovation: Broadli: Drinking my own Champagne (Abstract)

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*Editor's note: With her description of the Broadli tool, Mary Abraham turns traditional networking upside down. With the tool, people-bridging, so essential to innovation, is as an act of generosity, not personal gain. More, the asking process is an investment in creative idea-expansion, not just burnishing one's personal network.*

*-- Katrina Pugh, Columbia University*

**“Eating your own dog food” or “dogfooding” is a slang expression used by the technorati to mean “Being your own first customer.”** When you eat your own dog food, you can surface and eliminate the wrinkles that emerge in beta testing. It is a useful way of experiencing what your customer experiences.

Not being partial to dog food, I have adopted a variant of the expression: “drinking my own champagne.” The champagne in question is the theory my colleagues and I teach in the Networks and Collaboration course offered as part of the Master of Science in Information and Knowledge Strategy at Columbia University. This theory explains why networks are effective at scaling ideas, reaching people, and adapting; what makes social capital so valuable; how we improve collaboration; and how we best elicit tacit knowledge.

Every person who encounters theory and wishes to benefit from it must make the tricky leap from academia to business. I was able to make that leap thanks largely to propitious timing. At exactly the time the course took place in 2013, I was exploring an idea with my business partners for a new social networking app. It soon became clear that the business problems my partners and I were tackling could usefully be viewed, and possibly solved, through the lens of the theory I was teaching. What follows is the story of how my partners and I have brought some of that theory to life in a mobile app called “Broadli.”

The initial problem we set out to solve was one shared by many: “In an age of mass connectivity, how do you

find the right person who can help you in your moment of need?” “Is it simply a matter of building a larger network?” “The Broadli team takes the countercultural position that, rather than merely adding to the mass of connections, we should focus on a core set of relationships, and then invest in, and strengthen, those relationships. Our challenge was to make relationship-investment faster and easier.

So, we turned to the theory of social capital: what it is; how it is created; and how it can be increased. At the heart of social capital are the relationships we create and sustain through our personal and professional networks. However, this capital cannot be acquired through transactional means: it cannot be bought, sold, borrowed, or loaned. Rather, it is acquired and grows by service to others -- service that must be provided without strings attached.

The Broadli mobile app applies the theory of social capital by giving users a way to invest in their relationships. Users do this by providing assistance to others and by responding to introductions made by their own connections. In this way, users help their connections help others. Together they create a network of generosity.

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