

[TK SLUG]

## NO WONDER THE ECONOMY IS DRAGGING!

Recent estimates from analysts, consultants, trade groups, and psychics of costs facing businesses (an incomplete list). The United States' gross domestic product is \$11.66 trillion.



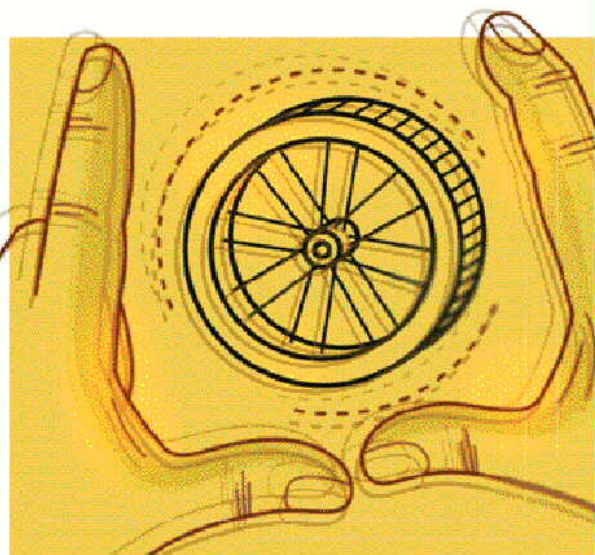
—Lucas Conley

Illustration by Harry Campbell

[CONSULTANT  
DEBUNKING UNIT]

## Reinventing the Wheel

By Martin Kihn



Rolling right along, the Consultant Debunking Unit (CDU) has discovered a lot of jargon going around—and around and around. If there's one thing consultants circling the globe all roundly condemn, it's people who spin their wheels, duplicating the efforts of some anonymous 45-centuries-old Mesopotamian transport engineer.

Consultant-author Stephen Covey, in his best-selling *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Fireside Book, 1990), spoke for many when he observed, "You don't want to have to reinvent the wheel." Oracle Corp. CEO Larry Ellison was more blunt when he warned tech industry leaders last year in *The Wall Street Journal*: "Don't reinvent the wheel." Trade magazine *Consulting to Management* opined, "Without research to discover what works and what doesn't, we continually reinvent the wheel."

So to close the loop: Reinventing the wheel is bad. Or is it? The CDU convened a round table of experts on the topic of wheel-themed innovation. And we found the consultants guilty of putting a little, um, spin on the truth.

• Perhaps no wheel is more beloved than the plastic-molded yellow-and-red wonder buggy called the **BIG WHEEL**. The original Marx Toy Co. version tormented two generations of parents before circling the drain in the mid-1980s. Other cycles appeared over the years, but they all had one serious limitation. "They just weren't big enough for adults," says Matt Armbruster, founder of Big Wheel Rally of Colorado. His solution? A revolutionary *reinvention* of the Big Wheel, designed for grown-ups, featuring a foam core, zinc-oxide fasteners, and hardened steel axles. Its best feature, according to Armbruster, is that "you can generate a lot of torque around a hairpin turn and get into a superwicked power slide."

• What's the most popular syndicated game show ever? That's right, **WHEEL OF FORTUNE**. This powerhouse has spun out more than 4,000 episodes over nearly 30 years. And last year, host Pat Sajak admitted, "Keeping the show fresh is a tough thing to do." The answer: an endless cycle

of reinvention, starting in 1975, when Sajak replaced original host Chuck Woolery. Other innovations over the years include new sets, special "theme" weeks, and a short-lived children's show called *Wheel 2000*.

• Alright, so toys and television shows must revolve around the whims of a fickle public. But surely, we thought, there are some wheels that don't need reinvention. Like the venerable **CHEESE WHEEL** gracing the CDU's holiday table. Turns out, we thought wrong. "Cheese contains a lot of fat and cholesterol," says Jo Stepaniak, author of *The Ultimate Uncheese Cookbook* (Book Publishing Co., 1994), "and it can cause allergies." She champions transforming "nutritional yeast" and other natural ingredients into a tasty dairy-free pseudocheese. "It's pretty easy to make blocks of uncheese at home in any shape—even round."

Wondering whether all this reinvention had some ancient engineers spinning in their graves, we circled back with Karen L. Wilson, researcher at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute Museum and an expert in ancient Mesopotamia. "The wheel may have been invented more than once in the first place," she tells us. "Both the Ancient Mesopotamians and the Egyptians discovered it at pretty much the same time." What were the first wheels like? "For one thing, they were made out of wooden slats and didn't have any shock absorption. Plus, they were very hard to turn. There was definitely room for improvement."

Our roundup: Sometimes consultants can be **WHEELIE** wrong.

Martin Kihn is the author of *House of Lies: How Management Consultants Steal Your Watch and Then Tell You the Time* (Warner Books) due out March 2005.

### CDUniversity

540, do a (v.) when a consultant changes her mind, changes it back, then changes it again