For the group project, your product ideas are supposed to be innovative. A "product" can be a good, a service, an event (like a football game), an idea, an experience (like skydiving) or any number of things, but our textbook generally refers to products as physical goods or intangible services (e.g. You can't "touch" your phone service – it's intangible. You can touch your phone, but you can't physically touch the service). Most students pick straightforward goods or services for their project products.

Below, you will find two emails from students as well as my responses. These will hopefully give you guidance in your project ideas.

PLEASE READ THIS ENTIRE DOCUMENT. It is only two emails, but many students consider them very helpful.

Email #1

Dr. Upshaw

Good morning, I am emailing on behalf of my group on the group project part A for MKTG3230. The group I am in would like to inquire if it would be appropriate to create an app as our product. It would essentially be a shopping app that would allow you to scan items, and let you check for better prices at neighboring stores, and provide online reviews of the product, and provide less expensive alternatives to the product. Thank you for your time.

My response:

My main problem is that similar apps already exist. I assume that your app is different in that it shows prices at multiple retailers?

I am ok with this so long as you *clearly* spell out what your app does different and better than other apps. If there are apps that do the same thing, then explain why yours is innovative and different from them. What features does it have that the others don't? (That is, if similar apps exist.)

Where will the product reviews come from? Other web sites such as Amazon.com? Or will you have your users write their own reviews? Be sure you have everything about your product thought out in detail. Also, how will your app make money for your company? Advertisements? A paid version of the app? Or both? At various parts of your paper, you will need to go into more detail about these items in Parts B and C.

So, in theory, I'm ok with the idea as long as you can clearly tell me what sets it apart or differentiates it, or what makes it innovative when compared to other shopping apps. See what else is out there, and ask if your product is different. If it is different in a substantial or innovative manner, then ok, but ask yourself is the differentiation or innovation unique and useful enough that it provides a competitive advantage to your app/company?

 Does that help?

Email 2:

Dr. Upshaw,

Do you care if the product idea has been presented in my class or not?

My response: No, I don't care if it has been done before in my class or not. It can even be a new take on an old product. When I read the product description, one of the things I ask myself is how is this product different and innovative from similar products? For example, washers and dryers already exist. But, I had students in one class design a washer/dryer combo with the washer on top, and when it finished, it dropped the close down into the dryer on the bottom. That way, they did not have to bother with moving the class from the washer to the dryer manually. That was a good idea. The innovation set their washer and dryer set apart from the competition. The innovation made the product different, or differentiated from the competition.

An example of a bad idea that students tried was opening a restaurant called Castaways. They knew that Bubba Gump was a restaurant chain based on the movie Forrest Gump, and so they started a new restaurant based on the movie Castaway. However, they did not really explain how their idea was innovative or different. Simply opening a new theme-based restaurant was not a new idea. It didn't really provide much that wasn't already out there. Sure, "Castaways" would be a "new" restaurant chain, but they didn't really spell out how the service, food, or anything else was going to be unique, different, or innovative from what is already in the marketplace. Themed restaurants are not a "new" practice. The way they described the idea didn't clearly identify the innovation. Simply having Castaway themed menu items, decorations, and staff uniforms may be a form of differentiation, but it is not really innovative. So, they got a few points for have an idea that was "different" or new in the sense that it was a new restaurant chain, but they missed most of the points because I didn't see what was really innovative about the service/restaurant. There is a restaurant in Japan, for example, that does not have waiters and waitresses. They have a conveyor belt that runs through the restaurant, and all food and dirty dishes are handled on the conveyer belt. Food is ordered on iPads or similar touchscreen devices. If you want service but you don't want to have to tip, that is the place to go. Some people may or may not like that idea, but they've made it a success, and the service at the restaurant is unique and innovative. Plus, they don't have to worry about paying waiters and waitresses.

So, basically, there are two concepts. There is differentiation (which can just be a new take on an old idea – like the restaurant example above), and innovation, which does something truly new, even if it only tweaks an existing idea, product or service by adding a "new" element or feature. Most of the time, an innovative product differentiates itself because the innovative feature naturally sets itself apart from the competition. However, some ideas are not innovative, but are just ways to differentiate the product from competitors. I can change the wrapper on my bottle of Pepsi, and that might make it look different, but I'm still basically selling the same old thing. That's not a new product or a product innovation. Simply updating a package or wrapper would be a promotional tool, similar to running a new advertisement – the same old product in a new wrapper.

Ideally, I want you to have a product or service that innovates. If the idea is innovative and described clearly, then it will naturally differentiate itself from the competition.

Do those examples make sense?