

THE CO-CREATION CONUNDRUM

Is using consumers to help create products the future of market research – or is it a step too far?

By David Murphy



Consumers – who needs them? Well, anyone who has a product to bring to market does. Since the dawn of market research, companies have turned to consumers to ask them what they like and don't like in order to reduce risk and increase the chance of a product's success. Now, some companies are starting to take this idea to its logical conclusion – not only are they asking consumers for their opinions, they're also seeking their help in bringing a brand idea from the drawing board to the supermarket shelf. It's what proponents call co-creation and some believe it is the future of market research.

A panel of experts took part in a lively discussion about the role of research in co-creation at ESOMAR's Innovate 2008 Conference, held in Copenhagen in June.

IS CO-CREATION NEW?

Andrew Needham, founder of the Web 2.0 Research and Co-creation Agency, Face, describes co-creation as "a revolution that's happening everywhere."

Needham has worked on several co-creation projects with Jaroslav Cír from Unilever UK, including one in which young consumers helped to create a marketing campaign for Unilever deodorant brand Axe, using the Face-run panel of young consumers called Headbox. He said there are two approaches to co-creation that reflect the make-up of your audience and how they want to co-create. The passive approach allows for quick and simple co-creation, with low barriers to entry making it fun. The more active approach involves high barriers to entry, as consumers are asked to do things that are more challenging and that require more skill, time and thought.

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Simon Pulman-Jones, European director of ethnography/innovation at GfK NOP, UK, however, wondered if co-creation is really anything new, given the fact that companies have sought to gain insight from their consumers for many years.

According to Needham it is, at least in the form in which he encourages brands to use it. "Yes, we have worked with consumers to get insight, but when we turn that into a product and take it to market, it all falls down," he said. "We need to involve them in creating products, because they are the people who are going to buy them."

Cir adds that technology has empowered consumers and given them the tools to express themselves, but in focusing too closely on client, rather than consumer needs, he believes that the market research business has taken its eye off the ball. "While the research industry concentrated on developing tools for clients, we have been left behind. We need to understand how to work with people and learn all the soft skills."

Andera Gadeib from Dialego AG in Germany agrees that the market research business needs to respond to the trend of consumers forming social networks. Gadeib's company has just launched a new methodology to help brands understand consumers better and to include their input in the new product development process. "This is just the beginning of what's possible," she said. "We need to engage not just the consumer, but also the client. This should be a step towards a new kind of research - not just paper reports, but visuals too; it has to be more fun on the client side."

WILD CREATIVITY

But can consumers be creative? Pulman-Jones, citing the example of street artists who used their skills to get Apple to respond to the problem of the high battery failure rate on early iPods, commented: "One thing about Web 2.0 is that it allows people who are not

CAN RESEARCH HELP?

By Jaroslav Cir, Unilever, UK

The giant leap that market research needs to take in order to bring innovation everywhere hasn't yet happened. We're still waiting for the moment when representatives of the big research factories arrive onstage and acknowledge that they are running on empty, and that it is becoming harder for them to sell the dream of certainty to even the weakest of clients and, after helping to deliver mediocre products that killed the dreams of enthusiastic brand managers, planners and creatives, they are closing their factories down.

The future of research is not with policing and controlling the process of new product and communication development (the bread and butter of the research factories). The future lies in letting consumers or experts in and co-creating new and exciting products and ideas with them.

This will require highly developed people-skills from researchers - namely empathy and intuition - as well as knowledge of the client's business.

For everything else (such as technical innovations in market research), there is Google and Facebook. And there are the global consumer panels, such as GMI, which let us complete large quantitative studies in fewer hours and at a fraction of the cost charged by the research factories.

Ironically, it seems easier for researchers lacking the intuition needed for doing the research job properly (ie the job of understanding people) to displace the issue and create the new, high-tech, silver bullet research methodology that will deliver pre-packaged ideas for innovations to clients' desktops.

experts to have a voice. But is there not a danger that you can delude yourself by bringing in consumers, that you'll lose that wild creativity?"

Needham agrees that brands need to do a lot more to understand their 'customer pyramid'. Brands will have a role for consumers at the top of the pyramid as co-creators, but there will be other consumers who don't want that sort of involvement. "You need to understand the different levels of desire that consumers have to engage with you and ask yourself what you are doing to bring them into your brand space. Consumers know how they want to engage with a brand, and brands need to match that and bring them into the conversation."

BUT HOW DO YOU GET CONSUMERS TO ENGAGE

Marta Hoffman from Research International worked with Istvan Kozari from FastBridge in Hungary to create a new website for Tic Tac where young consumers could trade favours with each other. Tic Tac consumers were heavily involved in developing this 'Network of Favours' website, helping to plan its look, feel and content.

According to Hoffman, it is important to distinguish between believing in – and understanding – marketing. "They understand how it works and they see through the techniques. But they are not negative about them. When we select these people, creativity is one aspect, but we also need to know if they are willing to use their talent to create something for a brand."

Needham agrees, saying that "the vital thing for co-creation to really work is that you bring in the insight team, the brand team, the research and development team, and the agency, and you sit them down with the key consumers, and that mix produces outputs you would not have got out of any one of those groups sitting by themselves."

ONLINE OR OFFLINE?

Although a lot of the hype around consumer self-expression has centred on the web, Cír believes that the distinction between online and offline is irrelevant in co-creation. "The most successful co-creation happens when people get together and work together," he said.

"The whole business is about finding the right people and the right environment to talk to them, and whether that's outside, in a café, or online does not matter." What does matter is the moderators who guide consumers through the co-creation process, who are "worth their weight in gold."

What is also important is the selection of consumers for co-creation projects. For instance, are they creative and do they form part of the brand's target market? But how much does this matter? Can a woman who does not use cosmetics work on a co-creation project for a cosmetics brand? According to Gadeib, it would be interesting to involve men in a cosmetics campaign at the ideation stage, but once it got down to concept

testing, "I would have trouble convincing the client to include people who do not use cosmetics."

This was not a problem for Needham, who says that four of the 16-member creative youth consumer panel at an Axe Lynx co-creation workshop were girls. The team presented senior Unilever stakeholders with high resolution visuals and communication ideas, suggested names, can designs, press adverts, digital solutions and activation plans. But maybe

that's just because girls are indirectly also part of the target market for Axe products.

Ultimately, the secret to co-creation is to have a simple process that helps turn insights and concepts into something real and tangible; things the target audience would want to buy and which the company might never have thought of without help from consumers. **RW**

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