



Three Essential Elements of Customer Co-Creation

The success of customer-driven innovation depends on who's invited to participate.

Historically, companies have been coy about engaging directly with customers, using market research to keep them at arm's length. But largely due to pressure from today's digitally empowered consumers, many top companies are shedding their shyness and inviting outside stakeholders into their creative or product development process. **DHL**, **IKEA**, and **Fuji Xerox** are a few of the companies that have incorporated customer co-creation workshops as a standard feature of R&D.

Recently, INSEAD has been applying the same principle to the development of Executive Education curricula. In May, **Philip M. Parker**, INSEAD Chaired Professor of Management Science and Executive Education programme director, invited Unilever representatives to the Singapore campus for a day-long collaborative workshop. The purpose was to map out an unprecedented leadership development programme for top executives that would integrate strategically placed "wellness interventions", i.e. five- to ten-minute sessions designed to promote personal growth and happiness. For example, one proposed intervention, inspired by Professor **Neil Bearden's Your Second-Order Self** website, had executives emailing their future selves with reminders to keep pursuing ideal goals.

Co-creation best practices

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The workshop was held in INSEAD's new on-campus **Creative Garage**, an open-plan, minimalist space – constructed with input from pioneering design experience agency Eight Inc. – that mimics a studio atmosphere. The Creative Garage's white walls are lined with colourful creations from INSEAD's design thinking courses, and a sign hanging from the ceiling proclaims the main house rule: "Don't be afraid to have shitty ideas." Professor **Manuel Sosa**, the driving force behind the Garage and facilitator of the Unilever workshop, says the space provides an "ambience in which you feel empowered to act, think, and behave differently".

Parker credits the success of the workshop partly to the fact that its setting "was perfectly adapted to brainstorming and creating killer ideas". For the workshop participants, the Creative Garage allowed greater freedom of movement than a conventional conference room. Parallel conversations and tandem brainstorming on multiple whiteboards lent a frenetic yet highly purposeful character to the day's proceedings.

Another advantage of the May workshop was the Unilever team's willingness to take full co-ownership of the process. "Only they could tell us the way [the wellness interventions] could be clustered," Parker says. "We wanted them to be responsible for what fit together and what did not...Without them there the full day, it just would

not have been possible.”

Three essential elements

Parker hastens to point out that not all organisations are fortunate enough to have an in-house design studio and partners that are so keen to collaborate. However, even without those ingredients, you can still get customer co-creation initiatives off the ground, as long as three basic elements are in place.

First, you need professional designers who can translate complex ideas into non-verbal language. In advance of INSEAD’s workshop, students from the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena (as part of INSEAD’s longstanding **MBA exchange programme**) prepared a poster-sized illustration to accompany each proposal, emphasising its relevance for the client and minimizing the danger of miscommunication. There was also a designer on hand at the workshop to sketch brand-new ideas and variations on proposals presented.

Second, you need a facilitator who understands the co-creation process. Parker says that Sosa’s stewardship was pivotal, not only in providing access to the Creative Garage but also in bringing to the table “content, a methodology for doing this well”.

Third, make sure to include the people in your organisation who are most familiar with the ins and outs of the product or offering under discussion, not just managers. The magic happens when customers interact directly with those who are in the best position to assess and implement new ideas. Drawing an automotive comparison, Parker says, “It is similar to having someone who knows about engines, someone who knows about wheels.” If you want meaningful results, don’t be afraid to get granular with co-creation.

Synthesis

The curriculum that ultimately grew out of the May workshop was something more than just the best ideas of the INSEAD contingent, shaped to Unilever’s specifications. The interchange sparked insights on both sides that opened up entirely new possibilities. “One of the benefits of a co-creation workshop,” Parker says, “is that ideas that never existed in the first place, or ideas that the customer themselves have, are brought in...Once you have those pieces, they can actually interconnect with other ones, and fundamentally new things can emerge.”

Phil Parker is an INSEAD Professor of Marketing and the Chaired Professor of Management Science.

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