
How to Destigmatise Repulsive Products



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Entrepreneurs can leverage “dirty creativity” to pitch unusual products that consumers may find objectionable.

Pancakes made from crickets, lamps made from fungus, handbags made from discarded cow stomachs and charcoal made from human faeces. The ideas for these novel products came easily to their inventors. The hard part is trying to make them appeal to consumers who may be grossed out by the “ick” factor. But where there is a will, there is a way. You can sell even the most repulsive products by changing how the public perceives them.

That process is part of what we call “dirty creativity” – the art of pitching novel and useful ideas or products that are stigmatised in the context in which they are introduced. The idea for [our research](#), published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, was born out of conversations we had about what we teach our students. When we discuss creativity with students and executives, they often think of it as something very novel or innovative. However, what many entrepreneurs and companies realise is that they must put these novel items out there in a form that consumers will embrace.

We believe that this tricky transformation is the key to success for dirty creativity. It is what has inspired consumers to gobble up lab-grown hamburgers, sit on furniture built out of recycled construction debris and wear clothes woven from plastic waste.

To investigate this concept, we interviewed dozens of **creative workers** and their associates, surveyed more than 200 consumers and culled through countless articles and reviews about “weird” products to determine how they become accepted in the marketplace. We found two specific tactics that creative workers harness to champion their products. Both involve drawing attention to the “dirtiness” while simultaneously mitigating the ramifications of doing so: relocating the dirt and recasting the dirt as value.

Relocating the dirt to a less stigmatised place

Helping consumers develop a taste for an unpalatable product or service requires a bit of shuffling to “relocate” the item from a place of stigma. We found that dirty creatives do this through wordplay: They develop a vocabulary that connects the product to more familiar, “normal” items.

For instance, instead of referring to “ground crickets”, inventors say “cricket flour”. In another case, the owner of a clothing company that uses ink from captured air pollution said their products started selling after they rebranded themselves from Pollution Ink to Sky-Ink.

Relocating dirt does not mean hiding or concealing features of the product. Rather, it entails moving the stigma of dirtiness within a network of common ideas that people have. Individuals already widely use labels to reframe what they are eating. For example, nobody says, “I’m eating cow” when they are having steak. What these entrepreneurs are doing is similar – they are trying to come up with a connective vocabulary so that their products are more pleasing.

On top of connective vocabulary, designers must also disguise the dirt in a way that does not signal stigma. In other words, they must shift consumer attention away from the dirtiness present in their products. For instance, a company making cow-stomach handbags told us that they chose to reinvent the discarded material as handbags because accessories are instantly recognisable to consumers.

Another example in the paper is Worm Tofu, a company that makes tofu and ice cream out of ground mealworms. In an interview, the owner stated that they definitely got more people to try worm tofu than if they had just shown up with a plate of steamed worms.

Recasting the dirt as a valuable product

Dirty creatives must also recast the “dirty” aspect of their ideas or products as something of value. This is most commonly achieved by refining the aesthetics of an item, such as by creating cow-stomach bags that are aesthetically pleasing enough to make the consumer forget about the materials used. We found that innovators also work hard to emphasise the sustainability of their products as an important reason to buy them.

Recasting is all about taking the features of whatever is dirty and trying to redeem the value, which is sometimes a harder argument to make. If you look at crickets as food, for example, they are much more sustainable than cows or other animals, and you get more nutritional bang for your buck. But you aren’t going to persuade everyone to eat them.

Our research also revealed that companies struggle to convince consumers that their novel products are safe, especially when there are no standards of comparison. To overcome this hurdle, many of the innovators we interviewed took the initiative to create their own standards to communicate the safety of their products.

Contributing to a cleaner, greener planet

Selling what seems like an absurd idea or product is particularly important these days because of the attention on the **circular economy**. More consumers are demanding environmentally friendly practices and less waste generation. The circular economy is expected to grow, and so will the need for dirty creativity. To create a cleaner planet, we must embrace products that make us more comfortable being **close to waste**.

Products will increasingly rely on dirty creativity for organisations to conform to a circular economy. Indeed, many of the entrepreneurs we spoke to believe in a higher purpose for dirty creativity and want their products to succeed for reasons beyond profit. Entrepreneurship is already an uphill battle without involving products or ideas that are inherently stigmatised or tainted. But the creative workers we interviewed were willing to deal with

this obstacle and wanted their inventions to be part of the solution.

In relocating and recasting these products, entrepreneurs are effectively performing an act of magic. Just as a magician can show someone being sawed in half without creating revulsion but surprise and intrigue – because the audience focuses on the ingenuity of the trick itself – so can creative workers let the audience see dirtiness while keeping them surprised and intrigued. The only difference is that the magic of transforming something dirty into something novel and useful is not only real, but might have consequences for the future.

This is an adaptation of [an article](#) published on Knowledge at Wharton.

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<https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/how-destigmatise-repulsive-products>

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About the research

["Dirty creativity: An inductive study of how creative workers champion new designs that are stigmatized"](#) is published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.