

User Experience - From a Participant to an Activist

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ABSTRACT

At a time of wireless networks and instant interaction it should be obvious that in most product and service development cases customers and users would have a creative role, but this is not yet happening. On the other hand, in some cases customers have an essential role in service design and even in production. In this paper we raise the question why some companies have strong interaction with their customers and why some companies don't involve users in their processes. In the field of co-creation we also introduce a new concept called *user activism*. The aim of our research is to define possible ways of user activism and its role in a particular branch of business, namely, food and gastronomy. During our research we tried to understand what the potential of co-creation is and what consequences might be observed when consumers are not engaged. We found the food and gastronomy business fruitful for the examination of customer and user involvement in co-creation activities because of the close link of food and gastronomic services to everyday life. As a summary, we came up with two extremes where, at one end, co-creation and user involvement are in the heart of business, which leads to user activism. At the other end, the food product and service design are often still based on the company or owner idea and do not reflect consumers' needs and creativity. In between these two extremes we also identified some crowdsourcing cases as well as more experimental and artistic types of service production.

Keywords: co-creation, user experience, user activism, sociology of eating out.

1. INTRODUCTION

In these days consumers are seen as prosumers, and companies utilizing user-driven innovation are launching successful products and services (Hauser, Tellis, and Griffin 2006). In service science there is a new way of thinking about organizations and their core competences. Customers have become a new source of competence for organizations – the role of customers has changed from passive users to co-creators of value (Mukhtar 2012). Today's users can use the Internet to access unlimited amounts of information and they are able to communicate with other users and companies anywhere in the world (Hoyer, W. et al. 2010). Literature emphasizes the importance of customer communities, customer-to-customer interactions, and the role that customers can play in product/service design and innovation (Füller et al., 2007, Grönroos 2008, Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004 and Vargo and Lusch 2004).

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Bendapudi and Leone (2003) define various forms of co-creation. Their list includes the emotional engagement of customers, self-service, and using processes to allow customers to solve their own problems. Interestingly, in one form of co-creation the customer actively engages with the supplier to assist in the design of a product. For example, Boeing actively encourages the involvement of their airline customers in aircraft design. At the most advanced level, brand relationship experience design involves the selection, planning, and implementation of value-adding activities and experiences for the customer.

The benefits of the lead user method can be found in literature (e.g. von Hippel 1986), and it seems to be important to get the “right” and active users involved in innovation work: “the contributions of the inventive users implied a substantial positive impact for the manufacturing firms that later introduced the radical innovations into the market” (Lettl 2007). Crowdsourcing, where certain tasks are performed by a group, is also related to this topic. According to one definition, crowdsourcing means that a company posts a problem online, a vast number of individuals offer solutions to the problem, the winning ideas are awarded some form of a bounty, and the company mass produces the idea for its own gain (Brabham 2008). Compared to the lead user method, crowdsourcing relies on a great amount of participants.

Our approach brings out a new perspective to earlier studies. Our concept is based on the consumer, not the company. Traditionally, users have been assisting companies but we turn this idea upside down – what if companies start to assist users?

2. CASE STUDY

We base our findings on four diversified cases where the data is collected by observation, through interviews with customers and restaurant owners, and by participating in co-creation projects. One of our case companies is a trendy bistro in Warsaw, Poland, and another one is a retro cafe in Rovaniemi, Finland. The most recent two cases are the pop-up restaurant and restaurant day concepts realized in Finland.

The first case is a trendy bistro in Warsaw where a unique table design is implemented. This Bistro is one of the most fashionable spots on Warsaw’s gastronomic map. The concept is based on a menu of freshly-baked bread and wine and one large table which should enable people to socialize. Nevertheless, the idea of the table is not working and it doesn’t attract people as it should. The case is used to illustrate consumers’ behavior regarding a place designed for customers, not co-created with them.

The second case is a retro café in Rovaniemi in Finnish Lapland. New product ideation was conducted in the ProtoProducts project, which is an EU-funded research and development project carried out between three colleges in Rovaniemi in Northern Finland. A new dessert product was developed by addressing a fan group of the restaurant on Facebook. The idea generation process was successful and tens of new product ideas were created by persons in the fan group. The end result was a chocolate cookie which was a tasty product, but the entrepreneur later found it too

expensive to produce in such low volumes. Still, the case shows that active users can be involved in the development process by using the social media, and the cooperation may prove fruitful. Of course, collecting feedback is a more traditional way to interact with customers than launching actual co-creation work.

The third case is a master chef-headed pop-up restaurant project located in Helsinki, Finland. The project called Hel Yes! is a “temporary exhibition presenting the best things of Helsinki, combining food, nature and design in a restaurant, shaping the future of food culture and destination marketing” (<http://popupcity.net>). We found that the approach of this example is artistic, and as a performance it attracts audience – although it basically does not involve users in service development at all. Still, compared to bistro-case where users weren’t involved either, this kind of art is acceptable, whereas nonfunctional business is not.

The fourth case is the so-called restaurant day, which is an initiative involving the creation of pop-up restaurants by ordinary people. Every “restaurant” follows a special concept created by the individual behind the restaurant idea. The concept can be chosen freely: “Coffee and cakes at the docks, treats from the trunk of a van, or a six-course dinner in your living room” (<http://www.restaurantday.org>). This is an example of how the creativity of individuals can be used and how services can be designed and produced by people themselves. We saw this as a significant example of user activism, while no particular company is reaping profits from it.

3. FINDINGS

The interesting finding is that there are still fields where consumer involvement is not taken into consideration in the new product or service development process, or the potential is used only to a certain extent. We found that the typical restaurant owner wants to follow his or her own vision and make a dream come true without listening to the customer. Furthermore, we found that people are spontaneously willing to participate even in service production. Based on our observations we conclude that there are two extremes. On the one hand, co-creation and user involvement are in the heart of business and there is room for user activism. On the other hand, food products and service design are often based on the company or its owner and do not reflect consumers’ needs and creativity. In between these two extremes we also identified crowdsourcing, in which a group of motivated individuals co-create new ideas as a virtual team. Also, we identified more experimental and artistic styles in developing and providing services. We assume that the traditional way of designing services and products without users should diminish and new ways of involving users and customers in processes should appear.

We shaped a fourfold table which illustrates the differences between user- and designer-generated content and also the level of spontaneity (see Table 1, below). In addition, we roughly placed our cases into the table: to the lower left the trendy bistro in Warsaw, the lower right the Hel Yes! pop-up restaurant, the upper left the retro café in Rovaniemi, and the upper right the restaurant day. We also draw arrows to show possible changes in practices – one area could be influenced by the others.

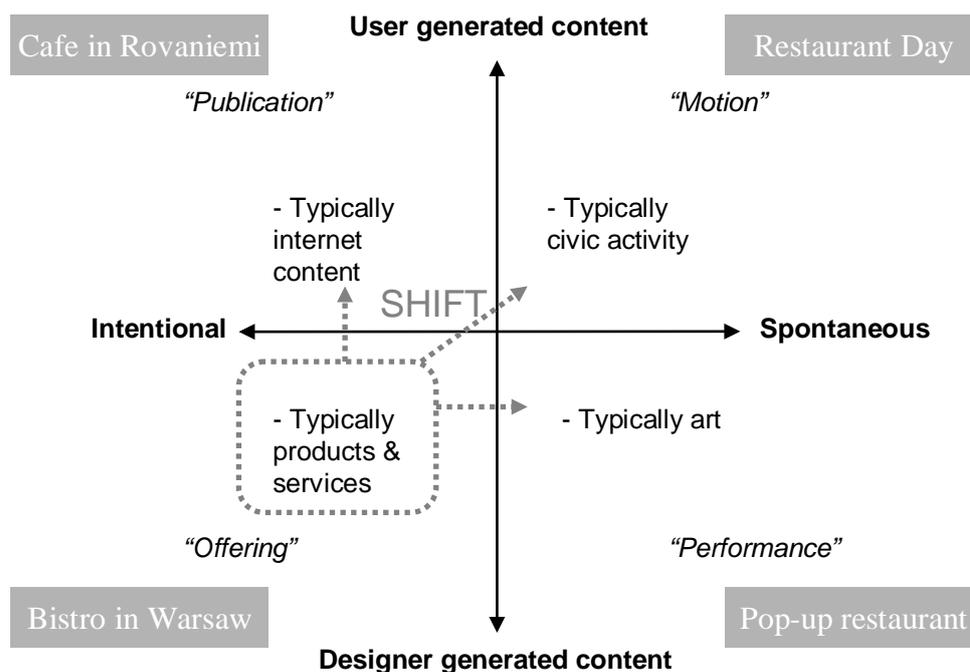


Table 1 The differences between user- and designer-generated content and the level of spontaneity

4. USER MOTIVATION

In addition to our restaurant case where food product-related idea generation was successfully performed by the Facebook fan group, we did three more tests to get more information about involving users in ideation processes using closed and open Internet discussion forums. We found a promising theory, according to which context users are motivated to innovate. In the first test we posted an invitation to the Marthas, a Finnish home economics organization. We asked them to participate in food products ideation on our private social media platform. We got only few participants and very few ideas. We understood that the members of the organization were not motivated to co-create because our task was not closely related to their daily activities or natural interests. In the second case we used a well-known social media channel which was customized for our purposes. We invited about forty people to participate and share their ideas – the result was the same as in the first case. We realized that it is very difficult to motivate people to participate if there is no compensation and if the participation feels like an extra job. In the third case we posted questions directly for open conversation in Kotikokki.net, a popular food discussion forum. We got plenty of good food product ideas in a short time. This case was successful and showed that in certain forums people are readily motivated to discuss topics and they are used to sharing ideas and for example recipes among one other.

All in all, we found that a self-guided social media group, for example a group of fans or people sharing a hobby, is very receptive to development activities and they have a natural motivation to participate – initially, people are gathered together to share their knowledge and experience around certain subjects. On the other hand, in two cases we experienced that inviting a group using a certain platform is very difficult and that they have no motivation despite their positive initial stand. Also, based on public

cases and examples on the Internet, we believe that certain forms of competition and crowdsourcing initiatives attended by professionals and hobbyists certainly lead to positive results (Lettl 2007). Also inside organizations it seems to be fruitful to use digital platforms for benefitting from group intelligence. When planning to involve users to participate in an innovation process it is crucial to choose the right target group, channel, and motivation. The relations between various types of forums and the levels of motivation are explained in the fourfold table below (Table 2).

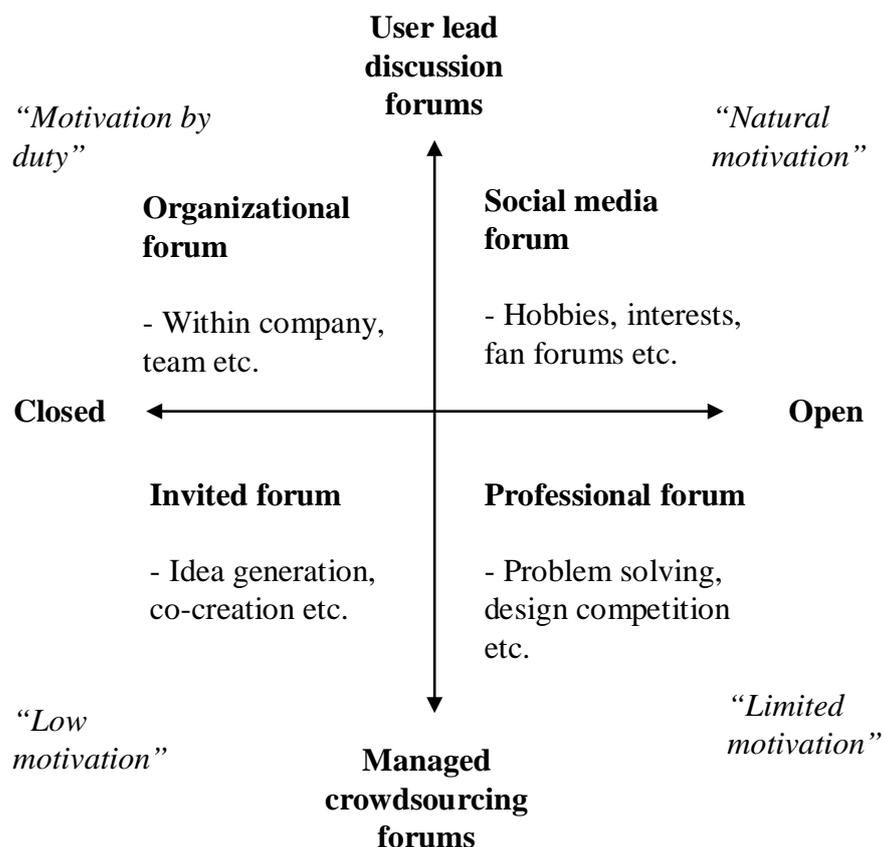


Table 2 Forums for co-creation in relation to the levels of motivation of participants

5. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

Our essential finding is that the creativity of users can be implemented more in the development process and in the post-launch period. We think that there is great potential for co-creation activities in the development of new service concepts. New service ideas can be developed and prototyped with users rather easily if the right methods are used and if the developers are experienced enough. It seems that social media platforms are very productive in idea generation and provide plenty of new product or service ideas. Yet, it is important that the participants are motivated and are rewarded in some way. Also, after product or service launch communication channels enable redesign and further development in cooperation with users and by using a small amount of resources. This kind of work is also important from the perspective of brand loyalty and customer engagement.

Moreover, new possibilities for user involvement can still be found. In this paper we launch the term *user activism*, which means that users don't just participate in development processes but they have an active role in starting and releasing new initiatives, as shown by our "restaurant day" case. This type of activism could be implemented in new service and product development on a wider scale. Furthermore, we believe that a new model could be developed to provide companies an opportunity to follow their active customers and to assist them with services. Thus, companies could start listening and accompanying instead of merely selling and offering. That would make customers feel like the main actor.

User activism is new as a concept, and our classification of user involvement is novel and solid as presented in the fourfold table. However, we did not have many cases and the range of businesses was limited. The next step would be to find new, interesting cases of user involvement for example from the highly-developed ICT sector and game industry. Also fresh examples on active users would be needed. And further, it would be fascinating to transfer new ways of participation to more traditional branches of industry and to put user activism into practice in the large-scale business context.

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