

VISION

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GOOD THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT

Helen Walker gives the recipe for a slow stew to create better innovation ideas - and how to get the most from co-creation...

Spending time during the research process to ensure actionable results are delivered is something many researchers struggle with. There never seems to be enough time to really dive deep into the data, follow hypotheses and focus on creative delivery. At Incite we work hard to ensure we spend an equal amount of time, if not more, on these elements, beyond the data gathering. This works well with traditional research processes where analysis time is built in between stages, but using some of the 'new' methodologies makes it harder to build in thinking time. Co-creation, for example, is frequently used as a quick and relatively low-cost solution for generating insight, ideas and innovations all in one speedy go – or at least all in one fast methodology.

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Our view is that co-creation is great at doing what it says on the tin. But to achieve truly game changing innovation you still need to take a little more time, consideration and patience.

What is this co-creation business?

So what do we mean by co-creation? In the context of new product development, co-creation is a process which actively involves consumers in the creation and development of new products and services. When applied well, the process results in innovation that genuinely delivers value to both parties. For the consumers, it solves key needs

and tensions that, if left unaddressed, could result in frustration and disappointment. For the brand, it delivers increased competitive advantage, improved customer loyalty and may even generate an entirely new customer base. However, not all co-creative methods are currently delivering this sense of shared value. This is partly because of a lack of understanding around where and how co-creation should be applied within the innovation cycle, as well as who with.

Fast food ain't good for the soul

One of the temptations with co-creation is to sell it as a quick, cheap, one-stop shop for powerful innovation. But, there is always a danger in trying to achieve too much in a short space of time and with the wrong tools. The greatest danger is that you end up producing mediocre ideas that are then fed into the next stages of the innovation funnel. Our experience in concept testing shows that the more mediocre ideas that are fed into the screening process, the more mediocre the benchmark that they are tested against becomes. So, ideas that outperform the norm aren't really doing that well – they are just slightly above mediocre. It is in everyone's interests therefore to ensure that the ideas that do get fed into the concept screening stage are good ideas, to maintain a high bar.

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Recipe for a good stew

The three steps to truly differentiated ideas are insight generation, idea generation and solution creation. Each of these steps needs an approach and, more importantly, an audience that is tailored to the desired output.

Insight generation

All great ideas are born out of great insight. In the case of NPD, it boils down to the identification of unmet consumer needs. These uncovered needs provide the bedrock of any successful innovation, so it is essential that they are genuine and resonate with enough of the target audience to justify the investment. The 'fresh off the street' consumer is best placed to deliver the insight needed at this stage. By spending time with consumers you can understand their day-to-day issues and frustrations and identify their needs relevant to your category of interest.

At this point it is critical to ensure that consumers actually want these needs to be met. We recently undertook an ethnographic study on shared snacking occasions. The objective was to uncover the tensions, above and beyond those of which the consumer was aware, created by sharing snacks with other people. Our hypothesis going into the research was there were a number of obvious tensions arising from sharing that should be addressed. However, in-depth analysis revealed that several of the tensions we initially uncovered were so entwined with the sharing experience, that to remove them would undermine the value of the experience altogether. This shows the importance of challenging initial assumptions before moving on to the next step of the process.

Idea generation

Idea generation takes the key insights and needs territories from step one and begins to shape them into ideas. A workshop with the appropriate audience is the best way to elicit these ideas, although online communities and other methods can work if managed well. Moving from the actual (insight) to the possible (idea) and from today to the future requires quite a mental leap. As anyone who has attempted it knows, this can often prove too challenging for the average consumer.

Idea generation is usually reserved for experts. 'Experts', depending on the project, can be consumers with particular skills in and knowledge of the sector, academics, or experts from within a client's business. It is important that all participants have a combination of knowledge and experience to draw from. This allows the experts to form ideas that are strongly grounded in consumer truths from the insight generation stage, as well as to take into account current and future trends drawn from their own experience.

Solution creation

The third step is the most difficult. How do you know your great idea translates into an actual product or service that consumers will embrace? This is when co-creation as a methodology really shines. It allows you to bring consumers back into the process to shape and create products and services that they will really desire and value. The type of consumer will differ depending on the nature of the idea and the timescale of launch. For future focused ideas that are five years down the line, the recruitment of forward-thinking consumers is needed rather than your average Joe. But the key thing is that they should nevertheless be consumers and potential users of the product or service.

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Employing co-creative methods with consumers at this stage lessens the risk of a mediocre concept moving onto further stages of the innovation cycle. That is not to say it won't need further refinement down the line, but at least you know that when it gets to that point, consumers won't reject it completely!



Opt for à la carte rather than a meal deal

After ten years of growth in the industry, co-creation is definitely here to stay. It's becoming more and more relevant in an era where consumers are increasingly familiar with the idea of modifying products and services to best suit their needs and means.

Whilst co-creation may be more suited to modern day brand-consumer interactions, its weaknesses become apparent when it is extracted from the context of a broader innovation study and expected to deliver both insights and solutions in one sitting. We at Incite believe the true value of co-creation is realised when it works in harmony with other complementary methodologies as part of a broader process. This will put you in a much stronger position for generating truly groundbreaking concepts – rather than slightly better than mediocre ones.

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