

VISION

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REAL LIFE INSPIRES INNOVATION

Rather than pouring more and more poor quality ideas into the innovation funnel, in the hope that eventually one will be 'the big idea', Ester Petrie describes a way to identify hidden opportunities that lead to genuinely breakthrough ideas which are sustainably big and different...

How many times in the last month have you burnt the toast? Or, had to adjust the thermostat because you've come home to a freezing/boiling house? Or, struggled to keep your worktops clean, smear and scratch free? All these may seem like minor inconveniences in the great scheme of things. But how much smoother would life be if they simply never happened?

Let's face it, our day to day existence is made up of a million minor annoyances, which we cope with every day and barely notice. What's new?

As researchers, we spend a lot of time listening to people to understand their needs. Listening is fine, as far as it goes, but we already know that when

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you ask a consumer what they want, the answers don't tend to be too enlightening. So, we also observe what's really going on because the things

people do – and don't do – add great richness to our understanding. And when we observe, we are looking for signs of suppressed tensions, knowing that we have a much better chance of finding a real breakthrough in this territory. But this ethnographic approach can take hours of non-intrusive observation and you have to be very lucky if what you observe yields a new insight that is genuinely useful. We need to disrupt this process to fast-track the innovation process while still getting really close to consumers.

At Incite we are true to our name and we don't think pure observation goes far enough. We start with observation but then challenge people to question their own behaviour and those tension points. "Does that happen a lot? Why don't you do anything about it?" We can then start to assess whether what we think of as potential opportunities really are seen that way by consumers.

By pushing participants to talk about the things they deal with every day, we are able to tap into a rich stream of innovation that is not top of mind for consumers or clients.

The weakest part of any innovation process is the beginning.

Why is it so important to challenge consumers in this way? Because it is our firm belief that the



innovation process that most companies currently undertake is weakest at the beginning. Typically, initial work is done to identify areas for innovation and this is followed by ideation to develop a range of concepts. These concepts are screened, the weaker ones filtered out and the ones that show potential taken forward to the next stage.

But online testing has allowed us to become lazy at the initial ideation stage. Because we can screen hundreds of concepts, cheaply, we allow ourselves to create any old rubbish— after all, if it isn't any good, then it will be thrown out. Except it won't, necessarily.

Firstly, we have the laws of statistics: the natural statistical variation in research data (and often sample sizes aren't what they should be) will

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almost guarantee that a few ropey concepts will get through. Secondly, because of the pressure to fill the innovation pipeline, weak ideas often get through the stage gate regardless of how well they perform in absolute terms. Thirdly, the effect of testing an ever increasing number of weak ideas means that the average concept gets much poorer scores today than it did ten years ago. By sticking rigidly to 'norms', the hurdle we create for projects to leap on the way to success keeps getting lower and lower.

The final problem with this approach is that the innate conservatism of consumers means that genuinely innovative ideas are likely to be rejected, whereas safe, familiar line extensions tend to progress. Not only do these innovations not move the category forward but they also often cannibalise a company's other products.

A minor inconvenience; a major opportunity

We believe that the deficiencies in the innovation process are a symptom of one underlying problem

– weak new product ideas are rarely based on strong insights. Strong insights are at the heart of winning innovation. If we analyse our data and look at the relationship between concepts, and the insights that underpin them, the results are very illuminating. In a nutshell, having a strong insight does not guarantee a strong concept (we might not have developed a product that addresses the insight very well), but having a weak or no insight does guarantee a weak concept.

Numerous examples of great innovation exist with an insight at their heart that addresses a suppressed tension. Think of the invention of a suitcase with wheels, the Dyson, facial cleansing wipes or even dry shampoo. So, in order to prove our method in practice, we set about identifying a set of coping mechanisms that masked underlying tensions.

We conducted a series of extended, wide ranging observation and confrontation sessions with consumers that involved an 'evening in' including the preparation of a meal. (In practice these would be more focused and concentrate on a particular task or time of day). Through these

the overall result was a set of concepts that delivered both trial and uniqueness

sessions we identified a number of tension points which were translated into insights. Some examples address the tension points I looked at the start of this article; 'perfect toast' (at last!), a remote control heating system, or surface protection wipes to both protect and clean your worktops.

Taking these and several other examples, we developed solutions to solve the tensions and drafted the insights into concepts that we could test quantitatively. These concepts performed consistently well on variables like excitement, a key predictor of genuinely breakthrough products. More importantly the overall result was a set of concepts that, when measured against our database, delivered both trial potential



and uniqueness.

By working hard at the front end to uncover insights through proactively raising consumer tensions to the surface, rather than being passive observers, you can systematically uncover ideas that are both big and different. This improves the quality and not the quantity of ideas, to the benefit of your innovation process and the lives of your consumers.

This is just a flavour of the results. To find out more about our self funded study into breakthrough innovation contact: ester.petrie@incite.ws

