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Ten Easy-to-implement rules to boost innovation from within - Part 1: Don't listen to customers; observe them

BY DAMIEN DUHAMEL

In this series of 10 short essays, I will provide ten easy rules for you to adopt to instill innovation at the core of your company in Singapore or the rest of Asia. These rules are bold and will surely contravene inherited teachings and convictions.

1. Don't listen to customers; observe them

Unlike what we are taught in Marketing 101 MBA classes, customers rarely know what they want. The gap between needs and beliefs is the trap that separates "good" from "great".

This gap is not easy to bridge but made the difference between Creative's and Apple's MP3 player. Customer feedback helps you to address customers' needs. It won't help your business to develop new ideas that will amaze your clients and take your bottom line to new heights. Customers are after linear improvements, not after paradigm change.

Singapore marketers love focus groups. I don't always understand why. Focus groups reiterate old stories. The participants talk about your brand and your products / services and will tell your story according to their experience. Valuable? Yes, maybe, for issues centered on packaging, pricing, taste, etc.

However, the story you will usually hear in focus groups is already yesterday's story; **yet innovation is about future trends.**

Innovation doesn't start with "do you remember?". It starts with "imagine if ..."

Innovation is a tough exercise, but it must be done by the enterprise, not by its customers.

No customers 10 years ago would have said "I want a phone that takes 10MB pictures, plays 30GB of MP3 files, replaces my electronic diary, lets me to check my emails, surf the web, and watch TV".

Few phone users can guess or anticipate what phones will be able to do 10 years from now. Customers don't know and don't guess the future. If you were to ask me what extras do I want from my phone? I would probably answer "I don't know, I am pretty happy with all the functions I have and never use..."

So does this mean mobile phone technology will from now stop to evolve and no existing or new handset makers will be able to shake the industry with something truly revolutionary?

Think again. By observing your customers, you will see that they juggle credit cards, home keys, car keys, garage door beepers, ID card, library card, video club membership cards, gym cards, parking cards, cash cards, TV remote controls, air conditioner remotes, etc. with their super-charged phone. Now, once a phone can replace all these everyday utensils, true innovators will have delivered a phone that will answer needs customers actually have, not needs they think they have.

Conclusion:

Customer feedback (or "Rantography") only helps you to fix a useful but usually obvious problem. You did not catch it on time, but your competitors probably did.

Observing customers (or Ethnography) and interpreting their behavior helps you to see a usually not-so-obvious opportunity.

Next, we will look at how "promoting failure" helps innovative firms to deliver.

Damien Duhamel, Managing Partner Asia Pacific , **Solidiance**

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Damien Duhamel



Damien Duhamel is the Managing Partner of Asia Pacific, Solidiance

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