HACKING HACKS
How users are leading innovation

Ipsos MORI | Ipsos

I'm fascinated by 'hacks'. A quick online search connects you with like-minded souls around the world who bring helpful suggestions on how to hack everyday problems: Ever wanted to fill up your car with petrol without having to cling the pump tight? My favourite hacks are ingenious, funny and surprising, as well as being helpful – such as showing me how to light my barbeque with a piece of spaghetti.

Like my fascination with consumer hacks, as a marketer, I've long been interested in the concept of 'lead-user innovation' – observing how consumers at the leading edge of categories develop solutions, or hacks, to meet their needs better. It's been an important resource for innovation for more than 30 years.

Until now, this has conventionally involved taking a long time to find and then interview a series of relevant lead users (consumers themselves) from a category or analogue categories. Typically, you identify each participant in sequence, snowballing to steadily accumulate a picture of what's new and how the innovations are being developed.

While capable of bringing new innovations, the conventional lead-user technique is time and resource intensive, as well as requiring us to have a clear idea of what we were looking for at the outset.

The past few years have demonstrated how rapidly new businesses can disrupt established categories. Many of us now do humdrum daily tasks such as taking a taxi, ordering a new razor or finding somewhere to stay in a completely different way to just a few years ago. Put simply, markets are changing too quickly for the conventional lead-user technique to make sense. The pressure is on to find a quicker and better way to achieve truly disruptive innovation.

BEHIND ANY SUCCESSFUL DISRUPTION ARE TWO KEY CHARACTERISTICS:

01

It solves a fundamental consumer problem – e.g. an easily accessible way to save money towards different goals.

02

It delivers the solution in a convenient user experience – e.g. a banking app that allows you to partition your money into different pots to save towards goals such as holidays, Christmas gifts, large appliances, etc. In today's world, this typically involves the reach and functionality of online apps, but was equally true of the Sears catalogue which dominated rural American shopping, or more recently, supermarkets.

With incumbent providers often left standing by disruptive new entrants who seized the initiative and growth opportunities, we wanted to explore if there's a better way to identify tomorrow's disruptive ideas using the power of the internet. Could we combine the latest text analytics with our innovation research expertise to help clients identify 'lead-user innovations' before their competitors or new startups?

In partnership with the MIT Innovation Lab, Ipsos piloted a revolutionary approach to lead-user innovation, with a focus on kitesurfing. We chose kitesurfing as it's a global sport, and quite established with a small but notable core of enthusiasts, giving us a good mix of the conventional and the experimental. Kitesurfing has also been the subject of extensive innovation research by MIT, giving us a good basis for comparison.

For those of you interested, the winning innovations included using electric hydrofoils (so you can kitesurf even if there's not enough wind), drones (so you can video yourself while kitesurfing) and kite seats for disabled people.

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OUR APPROACH FOLLOWED FOUR STEPS:

01 We cast the net wide using a broad set of search terms to retrieve more than 250,000 consumer conversations about kitesurfing.

02 We iteratively used text analysis to sharpen the focus to only the conversations about real innovations, new ways of doing things or need-solution pairs. This generated a 'longlist' of 450+ potential innovations.

03 We applied category and research expertise to select 26 fundamental innovations that are generated by consumers rather than manufacturers. These are innovations that actually exist – not just ideas for things that could be nice if they existed.

04 We then undertook a trends analysis around the innovations and need-solution pairs to identify the final six innovations that are both new and have potential to become mainstream.

What interests me and I think will interest all of us is that the entire process took just a few weeks, rather than a few months. We didn't need to prescribe any parameters to begin with, and the analysis brought the innovations supported by plenty of images, consumer comments and reactions, all sourced from the web. And, if it can work for something as niche as kitesurfing, it could certainly help inspire innovations for most other categories.

In summary, by hacking consumers' hacks, Ipsos' cutting-edge Social Intelligence enables clients to keep one step ahead of the curve by inspiring and developing the innovations that meet fundamental consumer needs.

Getting hungry now. I wonder how my barbeque is getting on…

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