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When Users Take Control: Managing the Dark Side of Customer Co-Creation

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The increasing online connectedness provides consumers the opportunity to play a greater role in exchanges with companies and their value creation processes. At the same time, firms recognize that the integration of consumers opens up their innovation funnel and delivers access to new and often more user-centric ideas. Ideation contests are a commonly used tool to generate novel ideas with customers.

Deviant content in co-creation

But despite many benefits, ideation contests also bear risks, as firms give up a substantial amount of control to an unknown crowd. Some consumers use ideation contests as blank room to position unwanted content that becomes visible to "the world". They post contributions that range from obscene and/or illegal to unconventional and incongruous to the ideation contest and its host.

We call such unwanted behavior **deviant co-creation**. In our research, we found that in almost all co-creation contests hosted by a for-profit firm, some elements of deviant co-creation can be observed, in some cases so strong that huge global mega-brands have been forced to close their contest in fear for a loss of reputation and control.

A critical incident for Henkel

In May 2011, the German FMGC company Henkel launched a design contest called "my pril, my style" (http://www.pril.de/marke/meinpril/), which asked the general public to create a new label sticker for their dishwashing liquid "Pril" (Germany's top brand in this category). Contributors also had to entitle the self-provided design and vote for their favorite composition in hope of seeing it in the supermarket in the future. The co-design toolkit provided by Henkel contained mainly prefabricated design components, which could be arranged freely by the contributors; additionally a free-hand-drawing function existed. Disappointed by the narrow solution space and the impression that the company was merely interested in getting a "new arrangement" of prefabricated components, one of the contributors posted a design using the free-hand-drawing tool that contained a grilled chicken on a brown background and the slogan which said, "Pril: tastes deliciously like fried chicken". A lot of people voted for the "chicken flavor" dishwater detergent and forwarded it to their friends. Viral distribution made the design the top choice.

Unable to cope with the dynamics, Henkel tried to get rid of the design and failed in the communication process with the engaged contributors, as well as interested observers. When Henkel began to manipulate the voting and promoted a "standard" winner (as they did not dare to fulfill their promise that the design with the most votes would get supermarket space), it ended up with a social media disaster for the firm.

In an interview with us, the contributor of the chicken design told us about his motives to post this deviant content:
"My purpose was to show that an unforeseen design was possible via free-hand-drawing, which was presumably an unintentional function… I contributed a totally inappropriate drawing that had nothing to do with Pril, but complied with the terms of conditions… my design had an ugly color and idiotic text. It was evil and innocent at the same time."

How to deal with this?

And this is not an exception! With a growing use of co-creation, managers are struggling with deviant content in ideation contests, not knowing how to react to it. Despite many incidents of unwanted behavior in co-creation activities, research on managing and dealing with deviant co-creation in ideation contests is largely missing. So far, research in this domain has mainly focused on the general performance of innovation

contests, the novelty of ideas generated, the personal characteristics of contributors, and the design of incentive schemes.

At RWTH Aachen, we started a research program to look into the downsides of co-creation – and how to turn these downsides into creative power. Deviant content confronts participating consumers as well as the managing firm with surprising, unexpected, odd, unconventional, absurd, rebellious, highly original, unrealistic or inappropriate ideas. Even when participants and the hosting firm recognize that these ideas are unrealistic, inadequate, or not feasible, these ideas stay visible in the contest and could have a number of negative consequences.

- Deviant contributions may reduce the attractiveness for other contributors to post ideas or comments, as the contest seems to lack seriousness.
- Deviant contributions may signal a lack of control of the host, demonstrating participants missing quality of the management of the hosting firm, a perception that they may even transfer onto the firm's products or services.
- Deviant contributions may demand additional capacity of the contest managers of the firm to deal with the contributions in an appropriate way, balancing good will of contributors and negative effects towards a wider public.

Opportunities by deviant contributions

However, at the same time, deviant contributions also provide opportunities and could have positive effects, i.e. supporting the original mission of the ideation contest:

- Consumers challenging the firm by posting unexpected and unadjusted content may be at the root of successful innovation and the firm's potential source of inspiration.
- Deviant contributions could provoke other participants to think out of the box and addict oneself to a broader spectrum of possible ideas. This could lead to a stimulating impetus and more radical ideas.
- Deviant, especially humorous content could increase the delight and fun aspect of the contest and motivate other participants to engage more in the contest. They could raise the awareness of the content by virality in social media.

Firms hence have to develop a clear understanding of the various forms of deviant co-creation activities in ideation contests, and finally build up a set of practices to deal with or even benefit from deviant users. As deviant content could be used as a stimulus for radical innovation, a monitored cultivation of constructive deviant behavior would be of great interest to managers and innovation researchers alike.

We invite you to join the workshop at ISPIM 2013 in Helsinki to discuss with you how to deal with deviant co-creation content, how to communicate with its originators, and how to turn it into a stimulus for an even better outcome of the contest!

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