

Creating your own Renaissance: Involving Customers in your Innovation Process

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Leonardo da Vinci is considered by many to be the father of the scientific method and was unquestionably one of the most vital forces driving the renaissance. It was the renaissance which delivered us from the dark ages to the age of knowledge and reason and permitted the fruits of those sciences today: advanced technology, high standard of living, and a healthy life.



Behind Leonardo's extraordinary works was a deep philosophical belief: that excellence in achievement begins with a deep understanding of your subject which can only be obtained through direct observation, experience and experiment. We can use this wisdom in our product innovation processes by involving our customers. This can help us all take one more step toward creating an innovation – driven renaissance from the current economic dark age our country is experiencing.

Today, the Japanese manufacturers have a saying: Go to the Gemba. The Gemba is the place where it's happening, the source of the problem or the opportunity, the fundamental origin. When confronted with a manufacturing problem, go the shop floor and watch the machine. When contemplating a new invention, go to the place where the invention is needed and used. And when you're there, adopt the philosophy of Leonardo da Vinci to observe, experience and experiment.

Technology vs. Value

We have a tendency to fall in love with our own tools and technology. We also love our own ideas which all too often are made in isolation from the reality they are supposed to serve – the Gemba. It is a sad fact that most people who buy cameras and read camera magazines are more interested in the gadgets than the photographs. Ask your friends – would they rather spend \$1000 on camera equipment or \$1000 on a photography seminar. Almost everyone prefers to buy the expensive camera and forget the training.

Yet what we should be seeking are the great results, not great intermediate tools. In photography, it's great photographs we should seek, not great cameras. In the world of product development, we need to find great outcomes that are defined by the customer, not the unexamined use of technology for its own sake.

Designing to the Familiar instead of the Important

In the absence of a good connection to the world of the customer, it is easy for companies to design products and services that are familiar to them and that often takes them to the tools and technologies of their business more than the real world of their customers.

It's easy to ignore the customer. They are typically far away from your world. For many of us, the end-user customer is several layers of distributorship away. If we're lucky, our sales people have some direct contact, but sales people live in a different world – rather than listen and respond, they work to sell what you have as aggressively as possible.

Many people, particularly engineers and designers, have an attitude of “customers don't know what they want”. We see this as standard fare in our consulting practice. It is easy to get that attitude if you are not trained in ways to properly work with customers to develop product concepts.

Learn to Co-innovate with your Customers

Involving customers in ways that let you co-innovate with them is an art well worth developing. When you co-innovate with your customers, you create products they will want, need and buy.

One of the best ways to develop this ability is to actively look for ways to let your customers participate with you in the various steps of the innovation process. This means learning to treat them as a full partner in the new product invention process. The first step is an attitude change. It is a change from feeling that customers don't really know what they want to an attitude that they can develop fundamentally good ideas and express fundamentally true needs, if you only give them the opportunity.

Observe, Experience, and Experiment – With your Customers

When beginning to work with customers to co-innovate new products, we can follow Leonardo da Vinci's basic premise: observe, experience and experiment as your foundational process. What we add to this is to do these activities with your customer.

Find ways to observe them in the part of their lives where they might use your products. And while you're at it, get them to observe themselves. Make them aware of being aware. Help them to see things that they take for granted and then ask them, “what could be better?”

Experience life with your customer. Someone once told me to go beyond asking customers questions: instead, watch them work, then stand in their shoes and do their job for awhile. Experience what they experience. And share those experiences with your customers so that you share a common base from which you can work together to come up with innovative ideas and solutions.

The third part of da Vinci's method is to experiment. In this context we mean to experiment together with your customer. Find ways to let them participate in your new product experiments. Let them suggest new experiments and let them help in the interpretation of your prototypes and trials. Don't just “test them”, but test with them. Involve them. Grant them the ability to actively participate so that you innovate together.

Lessons from Agile Software Development

Many of you have heard of the Agile movement in software. Agile has found significant success in many areas of software development and now people are finding ways to adapt some of the methods of agile to non-software industries.

Agile is a completely different way to develop than the classical “waterfall” approach. Instead of a highly sequential and preplanned approach to development with discrete phases, agile is a series of very short but complete development cycles with a result at the end of each cycle. A complete description of agile is beyond the scope of this paper, but one key ingredient is having very close customer involvement in each cycle of development. The effect of this methodology is to involve the customer very closely in each short development cycle. In this way, each cycle is an experiment that closely involves the customer and allows them not only to respond to a short cycle of development work, but to contribute to it as well. It is a beautiful example of co-innovation at work.

Customers as your Innovation Partners

With agile development, the customer is very much a part of the whole development process. Customers can help you understand their situation, design and test your experiments, help you tune the processes and participate in many other parts of the invention and innovation process. And although you may not be doing software, the principles apply the same.

Although each industry is different, we can all benefit by figuring out, for our unique situation, how to involve our customers in our innovation process. As I’ve said in a previous paper, “Innovation is a Frame of Mind.” And the one of the key frames of mind to cultivate and develop is that frame of mind given to us over 500 years ago by Leonardo da Vinci: before you act, create deep understanding by first observing, experiencing and experimenting, but doing these things WITH your customer as part of your team and part of your process.



Who knows – with that approach you may create your own ...renaissance!