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A Big Brother at home

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An anthropologist and a designer are inside the Fernandez family house, looking for something really valuable. They go through all the bedrooms, talking to all the family members, asking questions, walking into their lives, documenting everything with pictures, video and notes, listening very carefully to what each family member says, most importantly, observing every single detail surrounding them: “What’s that product for?” “How, when, where, who, why?”

The Fernandez family never thought they would have to give an explicit description of their cleaning habits, TV programs or grocery shopping; and that there were people so interested in everything they were saying. After three intense hours they were not only invited to dinner, but were also satisfied with their new treasure: knowledge.

What this group of researchers does is not simple pathological curiosity but a new way of generating ideas from a deep user understanding: innovation through research.

It’s about an unusual but highly effective way of understanding users’ real needs, developing ideas for new products and services that could help families like the Fernandezes.

Innovation has been recognized as a priority topic in any company for the last few years, therefore generating a need for new and less risky ways to perform it. Can you remember what people used to do when there were no ATM’s, cell phones, or bottled water? Currently, all these items are commonly used, but in fact they have changed our lives, they have given us new forms of communication, money management and entertainment. The quality that makes a product last and be successful in the long term isn’t its technological capacity, but its possibility to connect to user’s needs, wishes and characteristics.

Afraid of changes

Historically, business models haven’t emphasized understanding innovation processes within companies. In the last 10 years (especially in United States and Europe) the corporate and academic worlds have been incorporating practices from other disciplines like social sciences and design, opening important paths to the study of innovation and its application in private companies.

Unfortunately, Mexico and other Latin American countries are always behind. New trend aversion, fear of change and especially competition based on costs, keep the importance of innovation from being broadly recognized.

Many business leaders may argue that their firms perform market research, brainstorming sessions, recruit creative people, with the contention that they have plenty of “ideas.” But in fact innovation shouldn’t be limited to knowing your users or getting together to throw ideas every once in a while. Creativity and intuition are tools that will certainly lead us to new idea generation. But innovation isn’t only about novelty: usability, efficiency, convenience, satisfaction of unmet needs and coherence with the company’s strategy are the characteristics that make innovation what it is.

Using users

Performing traditional research market is not necessarily innovating. Interviewing Mrs. Fernandez outside the supermarket will not give us adequate information about how she lives, or what she does with her grocery shopping when arriving at home. Focus groups will let us know what they think, but not necessarily what they do, which makes a huge difference. Spending two hours in the Fernandez family house, talking and observing directly the way they live is invaluable.

Currently, the problem still lies in the gap between market research (description of users) and product development (solutions for users). Innovation based on the consumer requires both tasks to be part of a holistic approach, which covers observation activities, research, analysis, synthesis and communication within the same process with the same people. Even though research is an essential component in the process, there are several activities that go together with the value it creates.

Sneaking in on the consumer’s life

Some steps to revert traditional paths and begin innovation from user research:

Qualitative research approach

This may be the most useful tool for innovation. In contrast to quantitative research which helps evaluate alternative solutions and make decisions, qualitative research helps understand consumers the way they are: their motivations, perceptions, way of living, values and other characteristics. Furthermore, it helps us determine their unmet needs, finding opportunities for innovation.

What do they say and do, and how do they do it?

Often, what people say and what they in fact do are completely different. Questionnaires and focus groups are effective ways to understand what consumers think... in a laboratory. In order to understand users in depth, we need to observe them within the product use context, such as their home, office, car, supermarket, etc. Ethnographic and anthropological research tools can help achieve this. You will be surprised to see with your own eyes what people do.

Understand social and cultural changes that affect your business

We are so constantly focused on trying to understand all the details, that we lose sight of the big picture. Every industry includes a collection of overall forces, which may influence their performance, considering things from the impact of war to eating habits. Entire industries have disappeared because they didn’t notice changing social and cultural

factors that influenced them, and didn't react in time. It's not enough to know your consumers; it's important to understand the context in general. Remember: *everything that happens means something*.

Involve user throughout the entire process

Traditional ways to develop new products involve users only in the final phases; when evaluating a prototype to measure its possible acceptance. User-centric innovation should involve users throughout the entire process, from its conception (with participatory design techniques), until the product is launched. Therefore, failure risk is minimized and guarantees users' transfer of knowledge to the end product.

Think about the real value you will provide

Is it more comfortable? Is it easy to learn? Am I solving their problems? Try to measure from a neutral point of view the real value of your innovation. Make sure you are solving an unmet need. Compare this benefit with other choices users may have. Don't try to justify your innovation with complex arguments: the reasons to exist should be obvious for you and for your consumers. If you pass this test you may have something interesting; otherwise, analyze the reason why it's not working and start your proposal again.

Establish a user-centered innovation process

Act upon these recommendations: apply new research and idea generation methods, involve multidisciplinary and multifunctional teams and real users throughout the process of conceptualization, creation, research, analysis, synthesis, communication, production and launch of your innovations. It's not a new fad; it's a fundamental principle in the business world.

Conclusion

User research is the best tool to assure innovation success. Maybe next year, the Fernandez family will have at home products and services they never imagined before: in their dining room, a better, healthier, richer, nutritious and easy-to-prepare meal (since health and convenience are the most important things to consider); in their bathroom, toothpastes with individual suction (since it is easier to dosify and users like different flavors); in their financial life, self-assurance because they rely on an integrated services company (since dealing with insurance, credit cards, and bank accounts separately is already a nightmare). A year from now, with all this products and services available, the Fernandez family may remember the unusual researchers they were talking to back then.

That's the way innovation is: *difficult to imagine before knowing it, and incredibly necessary (maybe obvious) once it happens*.