

How online communities can jumpstart innovation

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Market research online communities can have a decisive impact on service innovations. On the one hand, they provide deep insights into the lives of the consumers. On the other hand, they can be used to specifically promote the development of ideas. Using the example of IN|SPIARY, Julia Koch and Natali Pohlschneider of Produkt + Markt explain in the interview with *Planung & Analyse* what constitutes successful online communities and how possible challenges can be mastered.

Ms Koch, so-called market research online communities, or MROCs in short, are currently booming in market research. Why?

Julia Koch: Companies and their product managers simply cannot develop new products in a theoretical bubble without considering the practical relevance of their ideas. Admittedly, methods like lists of criteria or the stage-gate process do help them to recognise the tops and flops early on. Nevertheless, innovation processes are very expensive and therefore every available method is used to reduce risks during development. Incorporating consumers into the innovation process can make things significantly more purposeful and efficient.

Companies have been integrating consumers in innovation processes via focus groups or in-depth interviews for decades. Exactly what kind advantages do online communities offer compared to traditional methods?

Natali Pohlschneider: These communities offer companies the chance to follow the research process more closely than for example in workshops or focus groups; consequently the process can be controlled more flexibly as well. In addition, the internal customers from in-house market research can be integrated more easily. Colleagues from the product management and sales department are able to access the participants' responses directly and at any time, which allows them to draw inspiration for new projects. Here it is important to train these people properly so that they won't get lost in the big flood of data.

Koch: Compared to focus groups or workshops, the availability of a significantly larger timeframe is another clear advantage. Our MROCs usually run between two to six weeks. This allows the participants to take a deep dive into the topic and really get their teeth into it. They are asked to share a lot of their attitudes and opinions. And that's exactly what they do – even really eagerly. Thanks to smartphones and tablets it has become a lot easier to integrate questions or tasks into their daily routines. Photos, pictures, and texts can be quickly produced and uploaded and then shared with others. Photos of make-up bags or fridges are just as little of an issue as questions on personal budgets or diet plans. At the same time the participants get to know the concerns of like-minded people. This builds trust and good group dynamics which is vital for online communities.

Pohlschneider: Moreover, the communities are very flexible. If important trends emerge, the moderator is able to react immediately; he can pick up certain aspects and have all participants discuss them in detail. Furthermore, it is possible for the moderator to communicate privately with individual participants, that is, without the others being involved. In this way, the advantages of one-one-one interviews and in-depth explorations can be exploited.

You have just explained the advantages of the communities in reference to insights into the current lives of the consumers. A precise understanding of their needs plays an integral role in the opening stages of the innovation process. But do you also see other advantages, particularly for the development of specific products or services?

Pohlschneider: Oh yes, definitely. This is the key advantage of this method. Almost everyone has experienced this situation: the most creative ideas do not emerge while you are pondering the problem, but rather the next morning in the shower. The participants in our communities deal with the topic and the corresponding issues over a longer period of time.

Koch: For projects in our online community, we go through all stages of the creative process according to Graham Wallas (see below*) in full depth; hence we are able to make the most of the available potential. All members of the community undergo the stages of preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification, and they can share their ideas with the other members. The customer is able to pick up the ideas generated and have them refined into a concept by a small group of the community, for example. This is an iterative process: After their development, the concepts can be discussed by the whole community again.

Despite creative techniques and the support of a facilitator, I can't imagine that the development of ideas is a simple matter. Is generally everyone suitable to participate in such an online community?

Pohlschneider: Not necessarily. Just as in any other quantitative project, it does make sense to check the motivation and especially the creativity of the interested applicants beforehand. This can be done in a creativity screening where the applicants are confronted with open questions that they need to answer as imaginatively and as unconventionally as possible. Of course they need to fulfill other criteria as well, depending on the field where their ideas are needed. This is why we specifically recruit users, members of the respective target group, or people with a certain mindset. For the online community of a lamp manufacturer, we additionally made sure that the participants were highly tech-savvy and active tinkerers or do-it-yourself hobbyists.

Koch: It makes sense to mix the group of participants, especially when there is a prolonged stage for insights. People directly affected – users, experts, staff members, depending on the project – are mixed with people who have proven to be particularly creative. We basically recruit individually for each project, but we also maintain a database of highly creative people who have also been trained in creative thinking.

Could you give us an example of such a study?

Pohlschneider: We conducted a two-week study on diet and nutrition for our own purposes. Overall, a total of 18 women and men between their early 20s and early 50s participated. The goal was to determine the consumers' current eating and shopping habits, and also to find out how they would feel about the issue in the future. Additionally, we pushed the development of ideas with regard to selected trends. This resulted in the joint development of an app that does not only facilitate grocery shopping, but turns it into an exciting experience.

What kind of challenges do you have to face when working with a community, and what tools do you use to master them?

Pohlschneider: Sometimes the situations are quite similar to those in focus groups with several participants. The facilitator needs to adapt his or her language to the respective target group. Furthermore, it is the facilitator's responsibility to ensure that everyone understands the task and context, that everyone can voice their opinion, that highly opinionated participants who dominate the discussion are stopped and that participants do not settle for a compromise, because they feel the need for harmony. These difficulties are more noticeable in online communities, simply because there are more participants involved than in a focus group. Furthermore, the discussions should stay

focussed and shouldn't drift off topic. In an online community, I have the possibility to open additional forums that can be used by participants to discuss things that do not contribute to solving the problem. One should always provide that kind of chat corners, because that's how the members get to know each other better. This has a positive effect on the team spirit and the results. Yet, this does cause another challenge: The more forums with different topics for discussion I open for the participants, the more cautious the facilitation has to be, in order to do justice to all contributions by the participants in the forums.

Which other factors are also important, in addition to discussions? How exactly do you operate in terms of other tasks and components of an online community?

Pohlschneider: For such a project, it is essential for the participants to demonstrate a high level of involvement, in order to generate illuminating insights and creative ideas. We apply a wide variety of facilitation techniques to achieve this. The combination of the online and offline world seems to be particularly appealing. On the one hand, it is an exciting element for participants, but on the other hand, it is also a complex data source for researchers. Within the context of ethnographic self-observation, we added a food protocol to the range of tasks. For 24 hours, participants documented every meal, every snack, and every drink and later commented on them as well. Over the course of the day, the participants consumed an average of seven meals. From the left-overs of the children's breakfast to the latte to the stuffed cabbage roll. It was particularly exciting to see how often the actual eating behaviour diverged from what the participants had expressed in prior discussions. In their own summary, some of them were almost contrite for eating noticeably more chocolate and significantly less fruit than they had expected of themselves. Another common phenomenon was that some people forgot to eat and drink regularly, particularly on stressful days.

Koch: This self-observation was also quite revealing in regard to the shopping behaviour. Do I choose the brand or the off-brand product? We asked the participants to post a picture of their fridge as well as of their pantry. Here we were able to see that some participants chose predominantly brand products for sweets and pasta. On the one hand, this was due to their own taste, while on the other hand, brand products are usually offered to guests. For other products like milk, store brands were chosen – and there turned out to be a lot less organic quality than originally claimed.

Pohlschneider: But in addition to our offline-online approach and traditional discussion, we also applied a wide variety of tasks to stimulate the development of ideas. After working out the flaws and challenges of the shopping process during discussions, the participants developed concepts for an app that doesn't just ease the process itself, but also moulds it into something very enjoyable. The identified pitfalls were deliberately

incorporated into the development process. This can be achieved by using personas, thus the specific profiles of fictive human beings who take on certain challenges. For example: “A working young man, who doesn’t really like to go shopping, yet he does really like cheeses and meat from the deli counter. He usually shops between six and seven o’ clock at night.” This already confronts the idea development with several different challenges, like crowded supermarkets during rush hour, a lack of motivation to shop in general, and the demand to create positive experiences at the deli counter.

What kind of ideas emerged from that?

Koch: An app that plans your ideal route through the supermarket – by applying smart timing and an ideal routing, it helps to avoid delays at the deli counter or at the bottle deposit machines. The best ideas were specified and converted into actual concepts. Afterwards they were ranked by the participants. Additionally, this immediately gave them some indication of how the individual ideas had been assessed. Direct feedback and participation may have a distinctly positive impact on the participants’ motivation. They need to understand that every comment and every ever so tiny remark is highly significant to us and we greatly appreciate it. But also after completing particularly difficult or demanding tasks, it is important to thank the participants and to acknowledge their effort.

Julia Koch and Natali Pohlschneider, thank you very much for your time!

Wallas’ Model of the Creative Process

- 1. Preparation** – Participants discuss issues and needs. At this point hidden areas of possible adjustment may be also identified. Here the creative techniques are also brought into play.
- 2. Incubation** – The insights gained transition into the participants’ subconscious mind where they intertwine with existing knowledge.
- 3. Illumination** – The ideas that emerge while doing other things, and which are then shared with the community, lead to the true innovations that could hardly be identified in traditional workshop settings.
- 4. Verification** – Selected ideas are put to the test by the customer, but also by additional participants. The ideas are discussed and ranked in regard to feasibility and added value.

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