Prof. Peter Pal Zubcek
From
University of Florida

"Using Social Networks to Improve Product Ideation"

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הדר E405, קמפוס המרכז הבינתחומי

ABSTRACT

A growing trend in marketing is for firms to tap the apparent wisdom of groups of consumers to generate sets ideas for new products and ways to improve existing products. Traditionally, marketers have attempted to involve consumers in product development through, for example, focus groups and, more recently, online communities. In online ideation/crowdsourcing communities consumers submit ideas that are discussed, elaborated on, and criticized by other consumers (e.g., Dell’s Ideastorm.com, MyStarbucksIdea.com). However, do these types of communities necessarily generate the best, most innovative ideas? On the one hand it seems that allowing groups of consumers to socially interact by discussing ideas should be potentially beneficial to marketers. On the other hand, it is not clear that the implicit social network structure in these types of communities—which is very dense—is optimal.

This research examines how network structure affects idea innovativeness in the context of networked new product ideation. We report results from a series of experiments whereby groups of participants contributed product ideas over multiple rounds in an online community setting. Participants were randomly assigned to positions in predetermined networks such that they could only see ideas submitted by
other participants to whom they were connected. The network structures were
manipulated to allow us to examine how two important characteristics of participants’
local networks—size (degree) and interconnectedness (clustering)—affected the
innovativeness of the ideas they produced. Interestingly, we find that having more
sources of inspiration (i.e., higher degree) does not necessarily improve one’s ideas.
More sources of inspiration leads to lower innovativeness when participants’ have
highly dense and interconnected local networks (i.e., high clustering). Having higher
degree only improves one’s innovativeness when combined with lower clustering.

We also find that this pattern of effects is moderated by the nature of the ideation task
such that it applies only when the task itself was more structured and specific (vs.
more unstructured and general). Our results have important implications for
organizing both small offline (focus groups) and large online (crowdsourcing
platforms) ideation networks, and suggest that by “engineering” social networks and
the patterns of connections between consumers, marketers are able to improve the
outcomes of their ideation crowdsourcing efforts.