

Are We Taking Advantage?

Contributed by RW Connect
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Back in February, Finn Raben posed a question to all young researchers: what are the ethics of research in today's world?

Co-creation is a relatively new approach to research, and this relative infancy makes it a prime candidate for being scrutinised by the ethics committee. At its best, co-creation is an empowering tool for organisations: it diffuses old-fashioned, top-down hierarchies, and infuses consumer-centricity to the core. As a result it helps organisations produce excellent new products & services.

But, what's in it for consumers?

At its best, co-creation also benefits consumers: the practice of taking part in co-creation can satisfy latent creative desires and needs, plus co-creation makes sure that the products and services available to them are actually what they want.

In short, Co-creation gives consumers a creative voice and that ensures that organisations act on what they hear. It's these intrinsic motivators not any financial reward that really motivate consumers to co-create with us.

But, doesn't the lack of a significant financial reward actually leave consumers at risk of exploitation?

Intern Nation (Ross Perlin, 2011) is a recent title that takes a critical perspective on the system that perpetuates free / poorly paid internships. It claims that organisations in America save \$2 billion a year by not paying interns a minimum wage. Businesses' saving money and interns building their knowledge isn't be a bad thing but does become a problem when those interns don't get anything of value back i.e. when they earn nothing and learn very little.

As co-creation develops as a discipline, we should remember Perlin's view of the internship system: our co-creators are willing to give their time to projects and so we must recognise that we have to give something back. But what should that something be?

We recently ran an extended study with consumer co-creators and found that:

- Consumers don't want large financial rewards, in fact 90% said they most valued relationship with the brand the chance to be creative.

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- We also found that consumers do want satisfaction of intrinsic desires (just like Perlin's interns who want a learning based value-exchange).

These findings make it clear that when engaging in co-creative approaches it's vital to protect the co-creative value-exchange: it is what will keep us all motivated to engage in co-creation. And ultimately engaged co-creators are what lead the breakthrough innovations that benefit everyone.

A few questions to ponder:

What happens if we don't protect the value-exchange?

If we don't raise the need for a "fair value exchange" as a topic of debate, is it possible that unscrupulous co-creation practitioners (or those who just don't get it) may take advantage of the fact that so many people are willing to give up time to co-create?

And if too many unscrupulous practitioners get away with it is possible that the consumers will "quite fairly" feel up taken advantage of? In which case, do we see a risk of a backlash against those that do take advantage? This would be bad news for the industry, and ultimately for consumers too.

Is there a solution?

As co-creation becomes more and more mainstream there is an opportunity to create vast, positive change for consumers and businesses alike but how do we (the morally aware practitioners) protect both the industry AND the consumer against those who are ready to exploit consumers intrinsic motivations?

Is the solution to focus on satisfying consumers intrinsic motivators?

YES. As founder of Threadless, Jake Nickell, said at PDMA 2011: "Focus on how you can drive value to your community, rather than how a community can drive value to you". and this will lead to the most successful co-creation projects for both brands and consumers.

Is there a need to revise patenting laws in light of user-led innovation?

Quite possibly "doesn't" the way they are set up at the moment means that only big business can really benefit?Â – On the really exciting thing about user-led innovation is that customers seem willing to donate their creativity freely, says Mr Von Hippel. This may be because it is their only practical option: patents are costly to get and often provide only weak protection.

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