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MEA- NINGS

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MEANINGS

Studies of innovation management have often focused their investigations on two domains: technologies and markets. However, design has recently gained much attention among practitioners and scholars as a source of innovation. Firms are increasingly investing in design and involving design firms in their innovation processes. Section four entitled “Meanings” leverages on the interpretation proposed by Krippendorff (1989), Heskett (2002) and Verganti (2009) according to which design is the activity that allows the innovation of the meaning of things.

Åsa Öberg explains the practice of exposing, an important aspect when a company wants to innovate from a meaning perspective. She emphasises the idea that if one wants to discuss the meaning of products, this is a personal matter. What one person finds meaningful, another might not. According to the research developed by Åsa Öberg, proposing new meaning increases if one first subtracts what one finds meaningful, the inner content. This involves a deliberate activity of Pre-emptying oneself, which seems to help to start the discussion on new product meanings.

Naiara Altuna elaborates the concept of Radical Circles, a phenomenon that spurs the creation of radically new visions. Exploring different case studies such as Homebrew Computer Club, Memphis and Slow Food she explains how Radical Circles can contribute to creating radically new meanings. More specifically, her research defines Radical Circles as few selected members working clandestinely and leveraging on criticism, in order to challenge and reinterpret the rules of a given industry. She highlights the characteristic elements constituting such a circle, i.e. leadership, locational resources, voluntary participation and the transition from closed to open.

Marta Morillo explores the role of design in envisioning potential futures. More precisely, she analyses a project-approach to futures, identifying the specific characteristics of projects that enable firms to explore long-term innovations and generate strategic visions. Using multiple cross-sector case study research, her research draws conclusions on the role of experimental design-driven approaches to future studies. Investigating three Visionary Projects (OurUNIVERSE by Cassina, Five Fingers by Vibram and GaiaX by Volvo Construction Equipment), Marta Morillo analyses potential synergies between technologies and meanings.

Claudio Dell’Era, Roberto Verganti



*THE PRACTICE
OF EXPOSING
INNOVATION
FROM INSIDE
THE BOX*



Åsa Öberg



ÅSA ÖBERG

Åsa is a researcher at the Information Design Department at Mälardalen University and a visiting scholar at the School of Management of Politecnico di Milano. After ten years of experience in marketing and design in different industries, she is now conducting research on innovation through new product meaning. Her studies are being conducted in cooperation with both Swedish and International organisations such as Unilever, Gucci, Abb Robotics and The Västmanland County Administrative Board, Sweden.

She has a special interest in expressing meanings through sketches and she is a member of the Urban Sketchers local group in her hometown of Eskilstuna.

THE PRACTICE OF EXPOSING – INNOVATION FROM INSIDE THE BOX

In a 2013 interview with Fast Company, Tim Brown, the CEO of the design firm IDEO discussed some basic principles of their innovation process. *“We come with what we might call a beginner’s mind”*, he explained, and continued: *“We do rely somewhat on the value of having an open mind when we approach a new question.”* (Baer, 2013).

“A beginner’s mind” is a common mind-set in the innovation discourse. The assumption is that people who are free from existing solution heuristics, and therefore free from preconceptions, can ease a type of “thinking outside the box”, valuable in the innovation process. Not all theories see preconceptions as an obstacle, however. A fairly new current in innovation research is focused on product meaning as a driver of innovation. As meanings spring from individuals and their beliefs, the personal perspective becomes a natural starting point. By leveraging on theories in the philosophical field of hermeneutics, this chapter shows that innovation, when in search of meaning, is supported by a positive use of preconception, rather than abandoning it. A type of “thinking inside the box”, from within individuals, drives this type of innovation forward. Through four case studies, this chapter describes a practice of “exposing” one’s own personal beliefs as beneficial in the striving to design new, meaningful products. What has emerged through the case studies points to the value of an “experienced” mind, towards preconception as a positive, rather than a negative, factor.

INTRODUCTION

When innovation comes through a search for new product meaning, it goes beyond a pure technology- or market-driven approach to new products. One example is Nintendo Wii that changed computer gaming from being an expert activity in a “virtual” world to becoming a socialising activity in the “real” world (Verganti, 2009). Meaning relates to the why of a product (its purpose) rather than the “how” (its feature or business model). It connects to “design”, from the Latin designare, to designate, to give meaning (Krippendorff, 1989). However, it is not always evident what the existing meaning of a product is. Neither is it always evident what a new potential meaning might be. Let us consider the R&D managers of the multinational consumer company Shinebridge. They had been working for a year to clarify both the current and the potentially new meaning of one of their core products. After several stages of exposing and sharing personal reflections, a few words had been carefully selected to describe the old, as well as a new, meaning dimension. When the marketing manager, Mr Q, entered the project in its last phase, he looked very sceptical. “What do you mean by this word?”, he asked. On his request, the whole group had to open up and expose their personal deep thinking again. “*Now I have said what I feel, I am ready to discuss the other perspectives. Let’s move on*”, exclaimed Mr Q finally. Once the current meaning became clear to him, and once he had shared his own individual thoughts, he could start to take in the proposed new meaning.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX – “A BEGINNER’S MIND” AS THE START TO INNOVATION

Tim Brown at IDEO is not alone in his approach to innovation. Academic perspectives on innovation and design also put forward the idea of “a beginner’s mind” (Stefik & Stefik, 2005, Bokeno, 2009, Brown, 2009, Kao, 2011). The starting point is that existing solutions are to be found “inside the box” but that beginners, unaware of the box, are more likely to search in other directions, or “outside the box”. In innovation management, the same arguments are also put forward, for example by theories of open innovation (Dunbar, 1995, Chesbrough, 2003, Lehrer, 2010) and of innovation as “problem solving” (Sutton, 2007). However, other studies, such

as those on organisational change, show that preconception is an issue to be dealt with, rather than just ignored. New thinking needs to become visible and to be discussed so that people can “leave it aside” (Lewin, 1947, Levy, 1986).

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX – AN ALTERNATIVE START TO INNOVATION

Not all theories see preconceptions as an obstacle, however. The field of hermeneutics pays attention especially to the role of preunderstanding when in search of new interpretations. The focus is on proposing several alternative understandings, and trying deliberately to reinterpret the situation, starting from one’s own perspective and later including others. New meaning does not come from an empty mind, but, on the contrary, from a mind built on preinterpretations, a mind with a horizon (Gadamer, 1960/2004). In other words, the existence of preunderstanding is a positive and necessary asset to drive reinterpretations toward new meanings of products.

More pragmatic is Theory U by learning and leadership scholar O. C. Scharmer (Scharmer, 2008). It provides guidance for how people and companies can strive for deeper awareness, for example of products. By freely opening up and “diving into” a situation, it proposes a process of presencing, which is a combination of the words “being present” and “sensing”. It includes actions of seeing the most intimate part of our

selves (our potential, or our “Self”) instead of sticking to the present version of ourselves (our “self”). By a clash of our old thinking (including our preinterpretation of something) and our future will (the future Self), new understandings emerge.

From a theoretical point of view, both hermeneutics and Theory U challenge the idea of “a beginner’s mind”. They suggest that no one can be a beginner when searching for new meaning. Instead we need to acknowledge each preinterpretation, make it explicit, and fuse it either with the preinterpretations of others, as in hermeneutics, or with our own interpretations of the future as it emerges, as proposed by Scharmer. Both these theories suggest an act of exposing one’s own personal beliefs, an act of becoming aware of one’s preinterpretations, examining them, discussing them and building on them.

EXPLORING FOUR CASES

Over a period of four years, I studied four companies as they were investigating proposals of new product meanings. Their insights were sorted as internal, stemming from the managers themselves, or external, contributed by experts in other industries. These external experts acted as interpreters by offering their own perspectives on a predefined future scenario, as decided by the firm (see Verganti, 2009, Altuna et al 2014). As well as these insights, the level of clash between different interpretations was also recorded. I checked whether or not the innova-

tion project had created a common arena for discussing product meaning and whether or not any new understanding was shared among the participants (see Figure 1). The companies all showed different levels of exposing the participants' own personal beliefs.

MARRON – STARTING FROM EXTERNAL INSIGHTS

Marron, a multinational corporation in consumer electronics wanted to establish a new range of products. Out of two options (starting from external experts and then generating visions inside, or else starting from internal visions and then bringing in external views), the R&D manager decided: *“We would prefer to first meet outsiders. If we start from generating visions ourselves I'm afraid we would come up with the same old ideas.”* However, after a workshop with eight interpreters, the managers struggled to make sense of the new insights. They did not show a shared understanding of potential new product meaning. Instead, the managers kept their own perspectives and preconceptions. In short, Marron did not seriously expose the personal thoughts of its own participants, and did not build an arena in which to discuss and develop common understanding. In the end, the innovation project did not propose any new product.

BLANC – STARTING FROM AND KEEPING OLD INTERNAL THINKING

Blanc, a global corporation for consumer goods wished to enter into new business. Contrary to Marron, they started internally. From individually envisioning new meanings, they arrived at one integrated meaning proposal that they then discussed with seven external interpreters and further. The implementation of the proposal was promoted by the most influential managers. Blanc showed attempts at exposing participants' own personal thoughts when starting from internal insights, but did not invest very seriously in deepening their understanding by bringing in new, possibly critical, participants. They managed to create a common space to discuss the proposed new meaning, but still understanding was scattered rather than shared.

JAUNE – LEVERAGING INTERNAL VISIONS

Jaune, a global player in consumer goods wanted to address a growing market segment. As in the case of Blanc, the first part of the innovation project consisted of an internal phase and the second of an external meeting. In contrast to Blanc, however, more engagement and deep reflection resulted in seventy possible new product meanings. In additional working meetings, new participants challenged each meaning by delivering their own visions. By exposing these visions, they managed to open up to new thinking. The team managed to create an arena to discuss and engage top executives outside the project, and the proposal moved into implementation. Jaune clearly demonstrates the exposition of personal ideas and visions. This project started off with the internal insights of the team members, and when new participants joined the project, everybody's combined understanding was deepened.

VERT – A NEW SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

Vert is a luxury fashion brand that wanted to create radical change in the meaning of the shopping experience. The process was similar to Jaune's with the difference that much more time was dedicated to analysing critically the individually proposed meanings without time constraints. The discussion went on until everyone felt that their proposed meaning was thoroughly listened to. In this way, there was time to transform each individual proposal into a common understanding. The team fully shared a common interpretation of the new meaning. It moved into implementation, bringing onboard the less supportive top executives. In short, Vert represents the case with the most profound activity of exposing the participants' own personal beliefs. Internal insights were deeply reflected upon with the help of new participants, resulting in a common arena and shared understanding.

METHODOLOGY connected to the practice of Exposing

PARAMETER	Insights	Level of clash	Outcome
	 EXTERNAL INTERNAL	 CRITICAL DEPTH LIGHT FACILITATORS NEW PARTICIPANTS	 COMMON ARENA SHARED UNDERSTANDING
CASE			
MARRON			
BLANC			
JAUNE			
VERT			

Figure 1 The parameters (Insights, Level of clash and Outcome) used to analyse the observations in relation to the four cases.

FOUR LEARNINGS OF THE PRACTICE OF EXPOSING

The first observation aligns with hermeneutics and Theory U: “a beginner’s mind” does not apply when developing new meanings. Project Marron, which explicitly opted for “a beginner’s mind”, did not succeed. Project Blanc, that partially exposed its participants’ own beliefs, achieved only partial results. Projects Jaune and Vert instead acknowledged that people’s minds are never empty. They dedicated a lot of energy to exposing their own perspectives. Each individual reflected on possible new meanings that enabled her or him to expose her or his thoughts, signalling that every person’s vision was considered.

The second observation reveals that the act of exposing one’s innermost ideas is not a simple act in which a person unproblematically divulges her or his vision. “Exposing” does not happen in a moment. This is clearly visible in the story of project Blanc, where the company started from the inside, and asked each member to envision a new meaning. However, it seemed that the company did not dedicate enough time to critical internal discussion of these new meanings, in other words, to criticising each other’s perspective. Projects Jaune and Vert demonstrate instead that this activity is a very complex, detailed journey. After repeating the process with personal expositions at least four times and after close to a year of reflection, different acts of envisioning and the fusing of horizons finally built new understanding.

A third finding is that the act of an engaged exposition of participants’ own beliefs does not happen only at the beginning but instead during the whole process. Firstly, in the case of the Vert company, the team actualised the new meaning while simultaneously recognising the understanding of the old one. This is in line with Scharmer and Theory U: the past and the future co-evolve; you understand the past (your “self”) by learning from the future (your “Self”). Secondly, as new team members joined the project, the journey of understanding new meaning continued. In project Jaune, a top manager joined the project towards the end and only after he had shared his own vision, did he finally feel more comfortable about embracing the proposal on new product meaning.

Finally, the act of exposing is not only an act of forgetting the past, it is a first step towards imagining the new, the future. In fact, as described earlier, it does not start by sharing the vision of the past, but by envisioning a new meaning for the future. It is by feeding in new horizons that one gets rid of the old. As Gadamer says, there should never be a state of empty horizons (Gadamer, DATE, p.XX). Rather than searching for individuals with “a beginner’s mind” (if they exist at all), organisations should instead acknowledge the existence of preunderstanding, and deliberately create actions to make this preunderstanding explicit and shared within an innovation team.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the activity of laying bare or exposing one’s own beliefs. It points to the fact that when the participants in these four cases did not expose their own beliefs with sincerity, the process of seeking to establish new product meaning seemed to run into difficulties, and the unspoken old meaning seemed implicitly to govern the discussions.

Both theories of hermeneutics and Theory U underline the importance of preunderstanding and the act of exposing it. However, neither of them offers guidance on how to do it. This study proposes, that the act of exposition does not happen in a moment. It takes several repeated attempts to analyse thoroughly, discuss and fuse each team member’s vision with those of the others. In addition, this act of exposition does not focus solely on the past but also on the future. The starting point is an exchange of old and new thinking between the members of the team, and not just an empty “beginner’s mind”. In other words, rather than searching “outside the box”, a valuable way of innovating product meanings is to search “inside the box”, inside each person’s self. By a deliberate act of exposing each individual perspective, new interpretations can evolve.

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“THE VALUE OF THE DESMA NETWORK IS WHAT WE ALL MAKE OF IT IN THE FUTURE – KEEP IN TOUCH!”

Toni-Matti Karjalainen, Aalto University

BDL (Business and Design Lab) is a research centre founded by the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts and the School of Business, Economics and Law at the University of Gothenburg and hosted by the School of Design and Crafts. The purpose of the centre is to support research within the cross-disciplinary fields of business, management and design. BDL aims to increase our understanding of design and how it can contribute to society, businesses, community and public organizations.
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DESMA, which is short for Design as Driver of Innovation and Competitiveness, is an Initial Training Network funded by the European Commission, FP 7 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. It brings together twelve partners to train a new generation of researchers, bridging the disciplines and various streams of design and management, as well as bringing the worlds of academia and industry closer to each other.

This book provides a peek at the research projects conducted by the thirteen Early Stage Researchers within DESMA in 2012-2015. Each researcher has written a chapter reflecting some critical aspects of their research, and we have asked some of the DESMA Advisory Board members to reflect further on the insights of the ESRs.

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