

SELECTED AREAS AND METHODS OF APPLYING THE CONCEPT OF WORKING CONSUMER AT A COMPANY

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ABSTRACT	This article presents theoretical deliberations on the concept of working consumer, and attempts to describe and translate the theoretical assumptions of the presented concept into practical aspects within the functioning of an organization. The first part of the article describes the new consumer role as a supernumerary, whereas the latter focuses on the practical ways and possibilities of using the consumer, acting as an employee, in a company.

Introduction

Changes in products and services available on the market are accompanied by transformations of customer possibilities and attitudes. Prahalad and Ramaswamy emphasize the importance of the changing role of consumers, who are transforming “from isolated into someone who interacts with other entities, including business clients” (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2005). The researchers point to information technology, especially universal access to

the Internet, as the main source of these changes. The development of Web 2.0, and, above all, social networking sites, creates the conditions for increased involvement of customers in various areas of the organization's activities.

In consequence, the changes in consumers have resulted in a new concept of "a working consumer", whose competences, engagement and motivation may significantly support organization's activities.

The aim of this article is to present the possibilities of practical implementation of the presented concept in selected areas of the company's activity.

Working consumer, a new role of a consumer on the market

The consumer role on the market has been significantly changing for several decades. This results from, on the one hand, dissatisfaction with the offer of products and services provided by enterprises, and on the other, the emergence of new possibilities to affect the market and shape relations with other participants and entities. According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy, the changes in consumers' awareness were mainly caused by the following phenomena (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2005):

1. The widespread access to the Internet has provided customers with unprecedented opportunities to obtain and exchange information. In many spheres of life such as health, finance, and education, the awareness of consumers who have gained control over their choices and, consequently, their experience in the scope of purchased products and services, has increased.
2. Company globalization together with easy access to the Internet have made it possible to overcome geographical barriers in access to knowledge and a wide range of products and services. Consumers can easily obtain information on companies, technologies, products, and prices from almost any place in the world. Internet access allows customers not only to obtain information on offers from all around the world, but also to purchase the offered products.
3. Networking of users and consumers has made it possible to create relations between participants, as well as strengthen their position with regard to enterprises. Consumers, who are connected into virtual communities thanks a global network, can easily expose empty promises and irresponsible actions taken against them.
4. Experimenting is another important characteristic of modern consumers. Access to technology and free information exchange have created the need to co-create new products and services by consumers, based on their own experience or observations of other market participants.
5. Consumer involvement in the protection of both their own and other social groups' interests has deprived companies of the possibility to autonomously operate and control promotion and distribution channels.

The above-described changes in consumer behaviour and awareness towards active involvement in social and economic life are also reflected in the activities of enterprises. Rieder and Voss have elaborated more on this topic and introduced a concept of working consumer in their research works. They claim that consumers are consistently taking over some of the tasks formerly performed by workers employed in organizations. Three key forces determine the intensity of development of the described phenomenon (Rieder, Voss, 2010):

- organizations strive to maximize process rationalization,
- a very rapid development of self-service technologies, mainly the Internet, but also automated devices that enable payment settlement or vending machines, can be observed,

- Consumers are gradually taking control over shaping their experiences with products and services (Rieder, Voss, 2010).

Consumers, who are not permanent employees, perform functions themselves and contribute to value-creation process, for which they do not expect any financial consideration. Moreover, the new role played by the consumers, who act now as employees, implies that they do not only serve themselves but also other customers, and work for the good of the company (Rieder, Voss 2010). This could be represented in online shop and auction houses customers, who advise other buyers by writing product reviews or evaluating credibility of private sellers. Customers also take “managerial functions”, e.g. they participate in improving customer service process (Jacobshagen, Semmer, 2009). Furthermore, they test innovative products as well as evaluate and comment on the solutions presented by enterprises.

Innovation and marketing as the key areas of applying the concept of working consumer

The creators of the concept of working consumer (Rieder, Voss, 2010), as well as Ritzer (1983), have defined the customer engagement in co-creating values as the convergence of consumer and employee's roles. In this context, co-creation means the customer's active participation and involvement in the value-creation process, on equal footing to other members of the organization operating in a given area.

The above-described research perspective may be called the co-creation of values by consumer, who acts as a supernumerary in an organization. The essence of this concept is the active commitment and engagement of customers who take over certain tasks and functions traditionally implemented exclusively within the organization.

The main organization's activities, which have been described in the literature on the subject as the key concepts of consumer involvement in the co-creation process, are the scope of innovations and marketing activities. Co-creation is present on several levels at a company as adjustment, improvement and development of new products (Wind, Mahajan, 1997), as well as discovering new ways to promote and improve customer service .

In regard to innovative product development, the role of consumer as a co-creator became especially important in the last decade of the 20th century. Cooper was one of the first researchers who drew attention to the need to learn about the client and listen to their voice in relation to the whole process of innovation development (Cooper, Kleinschmidt, 1986). In their works, Parhald and Ramswamy emphasized that innovations should require shaping consumer expectations, but also continuous response to their changing requirements, behaviours and experiences (Prahald, Ramaswamy, 2005). Information technologies, especially the Internet, have created a favourable environment for engaging consumer in the co-creation process of product innovations. Chesbrough underlines that the main advantage of social media is its universality and accessibility, as well as the fact that it perfectly integrates the online community (Chesbrough, 2006). Von Hippel adds that social media facilitates information sharing between users and emphasizes that the voluntary participation of consumers in communication process, as well as knowledge sharing, strengthens the process of co-creation (Von Hippel, 1986).

As T. Dryl noted, social media primarily focuses on dialog, polemic, discussion, with publishing information constituting just the beginning of communication process. Information can be freely changed, forwarded in various directions by subsequent process participants, who from recipients change into broadcasters of messages (Dryl, 2015). Furthermore, Vouri indicates in her works that social media carries out much wider scope of activities as it was traditionally perceived. She distinguishes five key functions carried out through social media: Communicating,

Collaborating, Connecting, Completing, Combining (Vuori, 2011). Communicating, connecting, and collaborating functions are particularly relevant in the process of innovation development.

Communicating is a function that encompasses publishing and sharing content in online space. The exemplary and most frequently used tools that allow implementation of communication functions include, among others: WordPress, Blogger, YouTube, Twitter, and SlideShare (Jalonene, 2014). The connecting category tools are used in the scope of social media, first and foremost, to connect users and create convenient conditions for interaction between them. Creation of connection network may be of professional (LinkedIn), entertainment (MySpace), and relational (Facebook) character if perceived in social perspective. On the other hand, collaborating refers to co-creation of content. The main channel in this category is Wikis, which by definition are responsible for support of an open model of knowledge creation. In a company, the tools attributed to Wikis channels, e.g. TWiki or GoogleDocks, may be used to manage knowledge, i.e. to co-create and store information by employees.

The involvement of consumers in the process of innovation development may take place in the context of the above-described social media tools used by the company. As indicated in the table below, a working consumer participates in the process of innovation development at all stages. The degree of consumer involvement in the discussed process and in the context of the above-described co-creation theory should be understood as the participation of consumer perceived not as an information provider but as a supernumerary involved in the operation. This kind of approach accentuates the recognition of consumer competence as a new approach to enterprise resources (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2005).

Another phenomenon that also largely focuses on usage of customer competences is crowdsourcing. This is a concept created by Jeff Howe (Howe, 2006), who described crowdsourcing as the outsourcing of tasks traditionally performed by specific individuals to an undefined large group of people through an open call for collaboration. The key value of crowdsourcing, which is presented in the literature as “the wisdom of the crowd”, is collective intelligence. Surowiecki proposes that “in the right circumstances, groups are extremely intelligent and often smarter than the smartest individuals in them.” (Brabham, 2008). Joint creativity of crowd participants is qualitatively different from individual consumer creativity (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, 2008). Situations that involve collective creativity of users are triggered by related activities: help in searching, joint improvement, and mutual reinforcement (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, 2008). This type of phenomenon is significant for development of product and service innovations. The use of crowdsourcing in the process of innovation development, especially at the stage of acquiring ideas for new products, has become quite common and many companies constantly use this way of acquiring creative resources.

As it was mentioned earlier, crowdsourcing constitutes not only a way to acquire resources located outside a company, but it is, above all, an opportunity to acquire competent and motivated supernumeraries. “Crowd wisdom” together with other resources can be used by means of specialized crowdsourcing platforms, which act as independent entities, or enterprises which create dedicated technological solutions for their own use. Crowdsourcing as a method of engaging competent consumers as employees is presented in Table 1.

As can be seen in the above table, the usage of social media in the process of product innovation development gains a new dimension. Social media is becoming a communication channel and a platform for cooperation thanks to which the consumer gains specific tools that allow them to communicate, joint communities, and share information or ideas at a convenient time and place. Therefore, the consumer may play the role of an employee, who despite not permanently operating in the organization’s structures, constitutes significant support for it in the

discussed innovation development process. The consumer becomes a creator, tester, initiator that operates within the organization in contrast to the traditional approach where the customer was only a source of information.

Table 1. Practical use of the concept of working consumer in the area of innovation

Stages of development of product innovation	Activities performed by working consumers	Description of an optimal group of working consumers	Examples of selected methods/tools
The stage of looking for ideas	Creating ideas and their verification	initially, all people interested (idea propagators), enthusiasts; at the stage of concept development: specialists, lead users	crowdsourcing platforms/InnoCentive; dedicated www solutions/Dell Idea Storm; social networking sites; thematic groups/Facebook
The stage of product development	Rating, testing and development of the prototype	lead users; specialists; engaged users	dedicated www solutions/laboratories; social networking sites; thematic groups/forums and discussion groups
The stage of entering the market	Creating and implementing marketing strategy	target group of clients	social networking sites, websites/Facebook, Tweeter, YouTube

Source: own work.

Another previously described area in a company where consumer engagement is of significantly importance, is marketing – especially activities related to promotion, creation of brand image, or support of the sales process. According to Kotler, the new possibilities gained by customers thanks to the digital revolution determine the necessity of thorough changes in the area of marketing.

The new customer possibilities mentioned by Kotler include, among others (Kotler, 2005):

- significant increase in consumers' strength,
- easier comparison of competitive offers (including the possibility of obtaining and comparing information on products without leaving your home),
- a greater variety of products and services,
- a large amount of information available,
- easier submission, procurement and negotiation of orders.

Customers are becoming more and more involved in an active and open dialogue with product and service suppliers. Moreover, customers who have never before constituted such great push force more and more often control this dialogue, which leads to fundamental changes in the market dynamics. The development of the Internet has provided clients with communication capabilities that they had never seen before, which, in turn, led to creation of many virtual communities. Chats, discussion forums, social networking sites, and various types of websites support the inherent creation of a community of customers who have not met in person.

When applying the above-mentioned characteristics of social media created by Vouri, it should be noted that in the case of marketing activities, it is appropriate to use the entire spectrum of functions such as Communicating, Collaborating, Connecting, Completing, Combining (Vouri, 2011). The additional two functions, i.e., Completing and Combining, are used to supplement content by adding a description or filtering information, marking and indicating connections between contents (Completing), as well as and combining existing tools in one place (Combining).

The above-described features of social media, as well as the channels and tools assigned to them, make it possible for the consumer to engage in marketing activities carried out in the company. A working consumer can simultaneously co-create content that is later used to present products or promote a brand, but can also create communities and share obtained information, thus support product sale or create the expected image of a company. However, it should be noted that the actions performed by the consumer do not depend on their availability or location, but rather on the degree of commitment and motivation to act. Therefore, it is of great importance for a company to identify and select the right consumer who can act as a specialist, enthusiast, lead user, or representative of the target group of buyers. The table below presents the ways consumer work could be included in various areas of marketing activities, including specific competences, social media, and crowdsourcing tools.

Table 2. Practical use of the working consumer concept in the area of selected marketing activities

Type of marketing activities	Activities performed by working consumers	Description of an optimal group of working consumers	Examples of selected methods/tools
Shaping the image of the company, the product, the brand	Brand and product presentation	Enthusiasts Specialists Lead Users Involved users	Websites/YouTube, Blogs/Blogger, websites/Instagram
Support for the sale of products and services	Informing about the functionality and benefits associated with the purchase of a product/service	Enthusiasts Specialists Lead Users Involved users	Websites/YouTube, microblogs/ Twitter, Blogs/Blogger /Facebook Pinterest
Creating content	Co-creation of product descriptions, advertising scripts, presentations. Search for unique content	Specialists Lead Users	wikis/GoogleDocks crowdsourcing platforms/Eyeka, Tongal

Source: own work.

As indicated by the examples, the concept of working consumer acting as a supernumerary has become possible to apply in a company. Access to modern technologies and tools has facilitated not only communication with the consumer, but, above all, has made it possible to involve clients in the implementation of duties assigned to full-time employees. However, as practice shows, companies on the one hand express demand for using customer competences, and on the other, do not possess knowledge or resources that allow them to make use of customer potential and engagement. A working consumer is still more of a theoretical concept than a business activity implemented in practice.

Conclusions

Decreasing customer satisfaction, changes in character and structure of products and services (including development of new product concepts) as well as in expectations, attitudes and customer behaviour are simultaneously the source of possibilities and threats for companies operating on the market. Many organizations perceive the growing activity and involvement of clients as a problem that is increasingly difficult to deal with; whereas others look at it as an opportunity to use clients as a source of competences that may prove useful for the organization.

The concept of working consumer acting as a supernumerary, apart from being beneficial for the organizations, also brings many challenges. It is particularly important to understand that intangible assets, including consumer competences (knowledge, skills, and experience) will be a deciding factor in growth potential for the company and its competitiveness (Parhal, Ramaswamy, 2000). The organization implementing the concept of working consumer should apply the principles of openness and flexibility in action, as well as create conditions for co-creation of values together with the consumer.

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