Discovering unk-unks: a problem every innovator knows

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“It’s what you don’t know you don’t know that can kill you,” is a saying that savvy innovators understand. The problem for most innovators, whether entrepreneurs or managers in established companies, is not coming up with new ideas; ideas are fairly easy to come by. The real challenge for innovators is to come up with ideas with enough relevance to customers so there’s a chance they will buy. Doing so means establishing empathy with the customer, getting out of a seller’s mindset and into a user’s or customer’s mindset, and finding a way to uncover what the customer really needs.

What you don’t know you don’t know

Why is discovering unk-unks – the unknown unknowns – or learning what you don’t know you don’t know, or what your customers don’t know they don’t know, important? Understanding latent, but often very real, needs that customers are unlikely or unable to readily articulate is crucial, but it happens neither easily nor automatically. Prospective customers often cannot consciously identify the problem or concern until they see its solution, especially for radical innovations. And radical innovations, while riskier than more evolutionary product improvements or product line extensions, are where the real upside of new product development generally lies. Many of the most exciting breakthroughs that entrepreneurs bring to market are innovations that customers haven’t known they needed. “Why didn’t I think of that?” we hear, after such breakthroughs come to market.

Did anyone tell Steve Jobs that they needed a personal computer? Did anyone tell Dan Bricklin and Bob Frankston, the developers of VisiCalc, the first spreadsheet application for PCs, that such an application for the Apple II was needed? Ditto for the first word processor, for email, for the Web, and so on. Did anyone tell British Airways, the operator of the London Eye, the huge observation wheel that’s a magnet for tourists and London locals alike, that such an attraction would pack them in on the South Bank of the River Thames?

What most of these innovations have in common is that they resolved some sort of customer pain or provided genuine customer delight. That is, they made it much easier – or better or faster or more efficient – for customers
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either to do something they already did, perhaps quite differently (PCs, spreadsheets, word processors, email) or to do something they had not done before (bring information quickly and conveniently to one’s desktop; or see London, a low-rise city for the most part, from a panoramic bird’s eye vantage point).

Fortunately, there’s a technique that can be borrowed from the social sciences that turns out to be a great way to do all this. It’s especially useful for innovators trying to find ways to solve customers’ needs, including the kinds of needs that customers don’t yet know they have or cannot easily articulate. It’s called the long interview, and it gets far less attention from the survey- and focus-group-addicted marketing research establishment than it deserves.

What might you learn from a series of long interviews?

You’ll learn much about how your idea might or might not fit into your intended users’ current attitudinal, motivational, and behavioural patterns. You might find your idea fits quite nicely. Or you might find some opportunities to adjust your concept, including concrete insights about how to improve it to give it more utility or emotional appeal. You might even find there’s a complete mismatch, thereby saving you the time and expense of conducting further large-scale quantitative marketing research or launching a product destined to become yet another new product failure statistic. You might also find there’s something else the customers need more than what you were thinking about, which may prompt you to redirect your efforts entirely.

How many interviews will it take to learn what you don’t know you don’t know?

Experienced researchers who use this technique find that the answers begin to get redundant once the number of interviews gets into the teens. By about interview number 20, in my experience, you’ll have heard virtually everything there is to hear. At that point it’s time to stop, draw your conclusions, and get on with the rest of your analysis to assess the opportunity you have in mind.

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