Using Social Media for Service Innovations: Challenges and Pitfalls

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how social software such as blogs can be used to collect ideas generated by the users in the service innovation process. After a theoretical discussion of user involvement and more specifically user involvement using social software and interactive web-tools, the article reports the results from a field experiment at a university library. In the experiment, a blog was established to collect ideas for service innovations from the library users. The experiment shows that blogs may generate a modest, but very useful amount of ideas. The experiment furthermore reveals that blogs might be useful to provide the institution with an image of openness and willingness to listen to customer input.

Keywords: Blogs, Innovation, Libraries, Services, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Concepts like Open Innovation (Chesbrough, 2003) and User-driven Innovation (Alam & Perry, 2002) are receiving growing attention. The concepts indicate that innovation is not confined to internal organizational processes but involve interactive processes, where organizations interact with external partners including customers and users. Research within innovation has traditionally focused on innovation within the industrial sectors. However, service innovation is becoming increasingly important as services form a significant part of economical and societal activities. Libraries, and especially research libraries, are facing considerable challenges as their services are getting increasingly digitalized (Carr, 2009) and the Internet poses a threat to the services they provide. Thus, libraries face challenges to innovate their services to stay competitive (Scupola & Nicolajsen, 2010; Scupola & Nicolajsen, 2012). According to Brindley (2006) library service innovation must happen in close contact with the users. Rutherford (2008) argues that such user involvement can be supported through new social software. The aim of this article is, therefore, to investigate the potentials of using social software for user involvement in service innovation in libraries.

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In doing so we limit ourselves to focus on the ideation phase of the innovation process in which the involvement of users has been found to possess particular potentials (Alam & Perry, 2002). Therefore, the following research question is addressed in this paper: To what extent can social software such as blogs be used in academic libraries to involve users in the idea generation process of service innovations?

In order to investigate the research question we conducted an in depth case study at an academic library, Roskilde University Library (Yin, 1994). The research design consisted of three steps. First a pilot study investigating existing innovation processes and user involvement in the innovation process at Roskilde University Library was conducted; then a field experiment was conducted in which social media such as blogs were set up on the library web page to collect innovation ideas from the users; finally the third step consisted of follow-up interviews and workshops to get feedback and evaluate the experiment’s results. All in all, the blog was considered by the library management as a useful tool to communicate with the users and to generate a manageable amount of useful ideas.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we theoretically discuss user involvement in service innovation and in particular user involvement through social software with focus on the use of blogs. Then we present our research method and the analysis and results. Finally we provide a discussion of the results and some concluding remarks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

User Involvement in Open Innovation

Chesbrough (2003, p.26) defines open innovation as “a paradigm that assumes that firms can and should use external ideas as well as internal ideas, and internal and external paths to market, as the firms look to advance their technology”.

Later research has focused on user involvement in relation to innovation, also in service innovation (Alam & Perry, 2002). This has resulted in a more detailed understanding of different types of user involvement. For example the so-called ‘lead users’ are users who develop new products/services due to specific needs they meet before the rest of the market (von Hippel, 1986; Morrison et al., 2004). These lead users include users who investigate new design opportunities (Baldwin et al., 2006) whereas “Co-innovators” are advanced users that combine existing products in new ways (Chesbrough 2003). Often the resulting innovations are neither owned nor controlled by organizations. However organizations may potentially commercialize these innovations if they can develop the prototypes invented by users and (mass) produce them. In addition, organizations may proactively involve customers/users in the innovation process (Alam & Perry, 2002; Nicolajsen & Scupola, 2011). In relation to this, Nambisan (2002, 2008) differentiates between three roles that customers may play: 1) as a source of innovation in the idea generation phase, 2) as co-creators in the development phase or 3) as potential users in the test or implementation phase. The three roles are rather different as are the requirements for both the organizations and the customers/users.

Alam and Perry (2002) have developed a 10 stages model of the service innovation process, going from idea generation to implementation and marketing and present and discuss user involvement in each of these ten stages. They conclude that it is most profitable to involve users in the earlier and later innovation phases. The reason probably being that these phases are closest to the role as “service user”. This role does not demand particular expertise from the customers, but only that the customer/user provides insights on their own needs and wishes or evaluates an existing or potential service. The phases in between are more work-intensive and typically demand professional qualifications. Research shows that if the users have to contribute in these stages, they either need a high professional level or they need further education (Nambisan, 2002; Alam & Perry, 2002). Educating the customer/user may be rather costly and it may easily become a risky
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