

# The Ask

Many famously successful innovation models are in the offing: Disruption, Diffusion, Open, Linear, Incremental, and so on. What makes any given innovation model effective has much to do with context and relevance. We are living in wildly exciting times for companies to innovate. Consumers most certainly expect it and many demand it. Some consumers want to be part of it; they feel there is reciprocity in the relationship that makes them co-creators, and the tools now exist to enable this.

As it happens, much of my husband's life work has been dedicated to innovation. Michael's expertise specifically focuses on exploring the underlying costs and dynamics of how organizations invest in innovation to create new value.

## Successful innovators know what they want their customers to become.

Among family, friends, colleagues and clients, Michael is notorious for responding (when asked his advice), "That's not the right question" or "What do you want the outcome to be?" As annoying as these responses can be, they can be game changers. Often, our fatal flaw when embarking on innovation initiatives is to try to arrive at a great answer to a flawed question. If we do not frame our first question correctly, how can we expect the desired outcome?

How often do we invest considerable time in an effort only to discover we would have benefitted greatly from spending a bit more energy rigorously thinking through the initial premise, hypothesis, framework, way-in, and guiding principles? In fact, asking the right initial question ensures we are beginning by clearly defining and articulating the expected result.

In no area is this truer than innovation. The very nature and definition of innovation requires one to continuously explore new, improved methods, and to make changes to what's been established. So, it makes

sense that Michael's new ebook (*What Do You Want Your Customers to Become?*, Michael Schrage, Harvard Business Review Press), rethinks the most important question that should drive innovation.

Michael calls this *The Ask*. When I first heard this, my brain did a backflip. It took a bit of mental gymnastics to think it through, and then stop and consider it in practice, in application. What flooded into mind were all of the existing innovations that validate this approach.

This is not a book review or a veiled attempt to promote (Michael does just fine without my help). But I now find it hard to write about innovation without giving serious consideration to his design perspective. I also feel it is particularly relevant today.

Putting consumers at the center of innovation has now become mainstream. Procter & Gamble led the way with its deep ethos of living with and shadowing consumers. Observing and understanding the behaviors, habits and daily routines that surround a brand is the best kind of research around.

Asking what you want your customers to become goes even further. It takes you even deeper into a space most consumers can't even articulate because it requires imagining something that doesn't yet exist. Asking this question transforms strategic innovation insights. As the book states, "it provokes managers and entrepreneurs into reimagining, redefining, and redesigning their customers' future. Whether you're in professional services, business-to-business, or consumer products, such understanding fundamentally changes how to invest to create new value." It's hard to imagine any amount of research to replace what comes with that clear, intuitive sense of how people live and what they need as a result.

This requires foresight. In a world of rapid change, marketers must develop the ability to see ahead. As good marketers, we are aware of a fundamental truth that many consumers won't acknowledge: People change over time, often far more than they think, or know. Innovation triggers this. Technology (ubiquitous today) also conditions us to crave change, novelty — what's new and improved — more frequently.

Apple, of course, is a perfect example of this.

Amazon too. As long as Apple keeps giving people stuff that they love (even before they know it is something they need or want), it will lead. But the company has also paved the way for next-generation competitors like Samsung's Galaxy devices that are built to enable consumers to become better versions of themselves. "Doing things I never-before imagined doing" becomes a very potent currency. No longer is just the device genius but so, too, become the users. Apple may have given us device courage, but now others are giving us device empowerment.

From the book: "Successful innovators don't just ask customers and clients to do something different; they ask them to become someone different. Successful innovators ask users to embrace—or at least tolerate—new values, new skills, new behaviors, new vocabularies, new ideas, new expectations, and new aspirations. They transform their customers. Successful innovators reinvent their customers as well as their businesses. Their innovations make customers better and make better customers." This is intoxicating stuff both for innovative companies as well as consumers. Essentially, the innovation becomes a transformative growth engine for the company and the consumer alike.

As an athlete-hobbyist, I immediately jumped on the gadget craze of devices designed to measure and motivate progress. A few to which I have paid particular attention are Nike Fuel Band, Jawbone One, and Fitbit. All three companies have every right to be playing in this space. Nike already "owns" it, so it's a natural extension for them (not to detract from the first-rate technology experience). Jawbone is already known for its identity extending, badge-like devices. Fitbit is a fairly new startup and most likely at just the beginning of its functionality and user experience.

All three companies and products are most definitely on a mission to enable their customers to become better and more self-aware—to transform their customers through innovative products. Interestingly, in some recent customer reviews, the bracelet style—as an always-on wearable extension of one's body—is garnering positive press.

Why? Because for users, it becomes a signal to the world that they are focused on fitness, monitoring their every move and recording it to chart their progress and motivate themselves into a better version of themselves. As the book puts it: "...value realization comes from how those innovations transform their customers' perceptions, expectations, and performance. Innovation should be an investment narrative

explaining how customers become more valuable."

Trendy, fast-fashion retailers have also done a good job of creating new marketplaces based on a vision for creating a type of consumer. Before Zara, Top Shop, H&M, etc., most people were accustomed to shopping by seasonality (even in regions that don't have seasons). If you asked shoppers a decade ago if they needed—or even wanted—a clothes store where they could go weekly for the latest selection, they would likely think you were referring to returning to the store for out-of-stock items.

Today, a new generation of shoppers has expanded expectations for what is possible. How will mobile devices transform what clothes shoppers become tomorrow? This doesn't necessarily mean the end of physical retail, but most definitely the end of physical retail as we know it.

This also applies to innovative marketing techniques. Take, for example, classic Converse sneakers. Although there are now endless choices in color, materials, and so forth, Converse sneakers are still basically the same as they've been since the early 1900s. However, through innovative marketing, they have communicated a lot about what they want their customers to become. Because of this, they have remained relevant across a mass market for a long time and are continuously adding new consumer segments. Through marketing, Converse made it okay to finish off a business suit with their shoes. Many of their loyal customers have become that guy!

Innovation at the marketing, product and brand level is about creating and creativity. It's about creating based on empathy for the consumer and foresight derived from thinking through what you want your customer to become based on your own vision, capabilities and creativity. Create-the-future is a liberating call-to-action for any businessperson—especially in a world where innovation is not an option, or someone else's job. Even further, those of us ready to embrace a customer we empower to become an innovator have a reciprocally virtuous cycle of co-creation ahead. ■



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