Developing a Better Understanding of Co-Creation: Consumers' Motivations to Create and the Underlying Processes

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Despite growth in the practice of mass customization/co-creation, empirical studies on the practice are scarce. There is little evidence documenting 1) the factors motivating the co-creation process and 2) the specific processes underlying the value creation that results from it. Thus, we designed three experiments to address these issues. Results from the first study reveal a three-way interaction between a creativity prime, the source of the design of the reference product, and the amount of instruction provided during the co-creation task. The two additional studies are designed to understand the processes underlying the results from Study 1.

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With the help of internet technology, companies are allowing consumers to co-create their products by specifying colors, designs, and features. In doing so, companies are outsourcing the design task while providing a product better suited to the consumer’s needs. Empirical studies on the practice of co-creation and mass customization, however, are scarce (Franke and Pillar 2003). The articles that have been published largely deal with the technical aspects for the manufacturer rather than with the experience and value created for the consumer (for an exception, see Franke and Pillar 2004). The purpose of this research is to understand the factors that 1) motivate consumers to engage in co-creation and 2) influence their experience and product satisfaction.

While facilitating a strong match between a consumer’s idiosyncratic preferences and a new product, mass customization also has its potential limitations. The infinitely large solution space created by the number of options could drive up the cognitive costs of the decision process, overwhelming the expected value generated by the option of an individualized product (Zipkin 2001). Satisfaction with the customized choice may also be diminished as a result of the overwhelming size of the choice set (Iyengar and Lepper 2000).

To date, we are unaware of any experimental studies designed to identify 1) the factors motivating the co-creation process and 2) the specific processes underlying the value creation that results from it. Thus, we designed and ran an experiment. In this study, all participants were presented with a color picture of a standard L.L. Bean backpack and reported their preferences for it. They were then given 1) the opportunity to customize its design by picking colors from a palate and 2) the chance to enter a lottery to win either the standard backpack or their customized version. If the customizing option was selected, preferences for the customized backpack were also collected. Three factors were manipulated between-subjects yielding a 2x2x2 design:

1) Creativity prime: present vs. absent: This manipulation primed creativity goals using an ostensibly unrelated task. Participants receiving the prime were hypothesized to customize the backpack more frequently than those receiving no prime and were expected to report higher preferences for their backpacks if they did customize.

2) Standard backpack designer: professional vs. amateur: Participants were shown the picture of the standard backpack along with one of two manipulations. In the professional condition, the text indicated that the marketing department picked the color combinations for the backpack. In the amateur condition, the text indicated that the color combination was the winning result of a consumer contest. It was expected that those in the amateur designer condition would be more likely to customize the backpack than those in the professional condition. This manipulation was also expected to influence preferences for the customized backpack since it manipulated beliefs about the reference backpack.

3) Customization instructions: present vs. absent: Participants were offered the chance to customize the color and design of the standard backpack. If they chose to customize, they were asked to explain their reasons and then they received the third manipulation (customization instructions: present vs. absent). It was hypothesized that this manipulation would influence participants’ propensity to enter the lottery and their satisfaction with their own backpack. Once they completed their designs, participants provided their preferences for the customized backpack.

Results

A three-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of designer ($F_{1, 172}=5.58, p<.01$) such that participants told the standard backpack was designed by another consumer reported higher preferences for their own customized pack than did those told it was designed by L.L. Bean’s marketing staff (39.2 vs. 36.5). The ANOVA also revealed a three-way interaction ($F_{1, 172}=5.02, p<.05$).

Chi-squared tests were used to determine the influence of the manipulated factors on participants’ decision to enter into the lottery. The creativity prime significantly increased participation in the lottery ($\chi^2=7.8, p<.01$), but neither the designer or guide manipulations had an effect. This study provides encouraging and interesting results, but a series of follow-up experiments is planned to better understand the findings.

Study 2

Why would the designer of the standard backpack (professional vs. other customer) influence one’s own preferences for the self-designed pack? Open-ended protocols collected in Study 1 suggest a possible explanation (e.g., the customer-designed backpack encouraged competition: “If s/he can do it, I can do it better”). To determine whether such competitiveness was responsible for the effect, Study 2 would manipulate the salience of competition. In one condition, participants will be told that their customized pack would be