Two Designer Skill Sets: Perspective Taking and Creativity

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This study attempts to address what psychological skill sets designers need to create appealing new product concepts. Different than previous literature exclusively focusing on a list of skill sets that improve concept originality, I suggest perspective taking as one skill set to improve concept appropriateness. People who are likely to or are instructed to take the perspective of another identify more problems, resulting in more appropriate new product concept. Perspective taking, however, does not guarantee more solutions that creativity guarantees.

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Designers are those who create concepts for new products. Considering the impact of new products in business world, it is important to know what psychological skill sets are required to create successfully appealing new product concepts. As psychologists suggest creative tasks must be novel as well as appropriate (Amabile 1996), marketing scientists generally believe that appealing new products are not only novel (i.e., original, unexpected, innovative) but also appropriate (i.e., useful, practical, effective). As originality has been the more respected than appropriateness, concept originality is known to be enhanced by a list of skill sets including visual imagination, analogical thinking, and creativity (Dhal et al. 1999, Dahl and Moreau 2002, Moreau and Dahl 2005). Then, how to enhance the other dimension, appropriateness?

There has been very little discussion about how to improve appropriateness because researchers on creativity have considered appropriateness as an unavoidable constraint of their research topic. New product researchers also have found that most skill sets that successfully enhance concept novelty either decreases concept appropriateness (Dhal et al. 1999; Jansson and Smith 1991) or have nothing to do with it (Moreau and Dhal 2005). In the present research, I propose that perspective taking is one of many skill sets that enhance the concept appropriateness. Since perspective taking is known to increased overlap between self and other (Galinsky, Ku, and Wang 2005; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000), it will help people identify more quality needs of other. This proposition is partially supported by Dahl et al. (1999) that consumer participation improves appropriateness of new product concepts. Combining literature on creativity with the reasoning above, I claim that designers who create appealing new product concepts need two skill sets- creativity and perspective taking- and that two skill sets take different routes for an overall concept appeal: creativity enhances concept novelty, perspective taking improves concept appropriateness.

Study 1 investigated if measured perspective taking and measured creativity predict an overall appeal of new product concepts. Thirty four Engineering students in one course, Product Design, designed new mobile phone concepts for children. Their concepts are analyzed with their scores of trait perspective taking measured by IRI (Interpersonal Reactivity Index, Davis 1983) and trait creativity measured by Gough Personality Scale (Gough 1979). As expected, this study generally demonstrated that highly perspective taking subjects scored higher in their concept appropriateness than lowly perspective taking subjects and highly creative subjects scored high in their concept novelty than lowly creative subjects.

In the next two studies, the role and limit of perspective taking were examined under a hypothesis; perspective taking improves the performance of problem identification but it does not improve the performance of problem solution. In study 2, 32 commerce program undergraduate students were asked to list as many problems and solutions as possible that a preschool child may encounter when she uses a mobile phone designed for adults. One group of subjects were instructed to actively take the perspective of a child and the other group of subjects were asked not to be involved with perspective taking. Study results confirmed the hypothesis. Perspective-taking subjects reported significantly more problems (5.67) than non-perspective-taking subjects (4.35, t=1.72, p<.10). Two groups of subjects, however, did not show significant difference in the number of solutions. As expected, the number of solutions was positively predicted by the number of problems (α=1.16, r=5.43, p<.001), suggesting that solutions depend on problems.

In study 3, experimental stimulus was changed to a service product (i.e., emergency department) to generalize the findings and previous experience was measured to rule out an alternative explanation. In total, 36 commerce program undergraduate students were asked to list as many problems and solutions as possible that family members encounter when they are at emergency department. One group of subjects were asked to take the perspective of one member of family, whereas no instruction was given to the other group of subject. The results replicated those in study 2. Subjects who took the perspective of a family member reported more problems (3.81) than those who did not (2.13, t=2.92, p<.01). Again, two groups did not show any difference in the quantity of solutions. Interestingly, 22 subjects who had experience in emergency department reported fewer problems (2.45) than 14 subjects who had no experience (4.14, t=2.66, p<.05), suggesting that previous experience does not guarantee a better performance in problem identification.

The findings obtained from three studies generally supported that perspective taking enhances appropriateness of new product concepts by improving the performance of problem identification and it does not necessarily lead to improved problem solution that creativity is required. All in all, designers who create new products need both perspective taking and creativity to improve their appropriateness as well as their novelty.

References