

Book Reviews

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Innovation Games: Creating Breakthrough Products through Collaborative Play

Luke Hohmann. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Addison-Wesley, 2007. 159 + xxix pages. US\$29.99.

In this brief paperback, Luke Hohmann outlines games that he developed for the software development industry and then later adapted for use in solution development across many industries. The author describes 12 games that will help companies uncover their customers' processes, perceptions, motivations, and needs by purposefully involving internal teams with their customers and potential customers. The intention of the games is to orchestrate customer engagements focused on an explicit goal, such as discovering hidden needs or prioritizing features; however, the games may be adapted for routine customer sessions like advisory council meetings. The author points out the benefits of employing an external facilitator to administer such techniques—and his firm offers such services. However, experienced internal facilitators will have no difficulty using the games and in fact will find these 12 games a useful way to stimulate innovative thinking.

The approaches described in this book appear to be evolutions of techniques used in the last 20 years by creativity and idea-generation consultants, ethnographers, and industrial designers. For example, “Remember the Future” is similar to a technique, “Scenario: Future Customer Experience,” used by consultants in helping teams depict customer experience at that point in the future when their solution concept would be developed and in use. Two of the games, “The Apprentice” and “Me and My Shadow,” are not games as much as they are brief descriptions of ethnographic research techniques, which are described in much greater detail in sources the author references (Burchill and Brodie, 2005; McQuarrie, 1998; Mello, 2002). By deploying these techniques in a game format, Hohmann creates a sense of play and provides enough structure and coaching so that other process facilitators can make use of some of them with the coaching provided. More specifically, the games are meant to help a team identify unmet or idealized market needs, to understand product and service usage and relationships with other products and services, and to shape future solutions. Results may benefit a wide range of areas: strategic planning, the discovery of new opportunities, the development of new solutions and their related road maps, marketing and sales effectiveness, and, ultimately, relationships with customers.

Part 1 addresses how the game approach fits with other market research techniques. It also outlines the process and describes frameworks for thinking about which game to use when and how to plan for a session. As presented, however, this discussion presents a chicken-and-egg challenge. The author describes each game in a sentence on the first two pages of Part 1 and then references them throughout the next 40 pages—but does not provide the information needed to understand the games until Part 2. This is extremely confusing for the reader.

The second section of the book is more clearly organized. For each game, the reader can quickly

discern the degree of open-ended exploration a game will allow, the time horizons for putting the outcomes into action, scalability (i.e., the range in number of customers who can participate), and the amount of customer, market, and physical preparation required to execute the engagement. The reader is provided with a description of the game, an explanation of why it works, and what preparation entails—including a checklist of needed materials, an overview of how to lead the game, and an explanation of how to process the results.

The third section concludes with additional tools and templates—more details for planning an event, sample agendas, sample invitation and thank-you letters, additional materials checklists, and frequently asked questions. The last few pages outline more facilitator coaching to enable an individual to think carefully about facilitating such an event.

Experienced facilitators may well find several nuggets in this book to add to their repertoire of facilitation tools.

References

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Dragons at Your Door: How Chinese Cost Innovation Is Disrupting Global Competition

Ming Zeng and Peter J. Williamson. Boston: Harvard Business School Press. 239 + xii pages. US\$29.95.

There has been a flood of books about China lately, but this one is especially pertinent for *Journal of Product Innovation Management* readers, as it specifically addresses Chinese product development strategies. It presents a disturbing picture of Chinese incursions into market after market by breaking established strategies of international competition. “What makes the rise of the dragons a new and disruptive source of

competition is their use of cost innovation to target low-end segments in novel ways. Rather than simply being low-price or no-frills, they are offering better value for money with an innovative twist” (p. 94).

Disruptive competition is not new. Many contemporary authors—most notably Christensen (1997) but also others (e.g., Kim and Mauborgne, 2005)—have addressed it. Whereas Christensen focuses on disruption via technology, the dragons disrupt by changing the value–cost equation. Here the Chinese can bring to bear their enormous reserves and experience in providing value at low cost.

The authors, Ming Zeng and Peter Williamson, are professors at Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business (Beijing) and INSEAD, respectively. Their thesis is that although we have considered the Chinese threat mainly to be one of low-cost manufacturing, the emerging threat is what the authors call *cost innovation*: the ability to exploit their low costs in radically new ways across all parts of the business—including research and development (R&D), marketing, and customer service—to offer customers dramatically more for less. “. . . As leading Chinese firms go global, they are adopting strategies that challenge some of the basic assumptions on which a lot of companies from the United States, Europe, and other developed markets depend to remain profitable” (p. vii).

Zeng and Williamson have a knack for providing three answers or three factors for any subject, so they reduce the myriad ways the Chinese apply cost innovation to three areas: (1) high technology at low prices; (2) product variety at mass-market prices; and (3) specialty products at low prices. The present review describes the first and last of these.

In the high-tech-at-low-price category, the Chinese firm Dawning has put supercomputer technology into the ordinary servers used in information technology networks all over the world. Whereas existing supercomputer manufacturers reserve this technology for those able to afford expensive proprietary chips, Dawning obtains comparable performance by gang-ing together dozens of ordinary processors on a special motherboard of their own design. Furthermore, the processors they use are not even state of the art, because such chips are denied to them by U.S. government export restrictions. Notice here that Dawning is not playing by the so-called rules by which most companies play to (1) achieve superior performance by advancing the state of the art in chip design and (2) offer the highest performance only in their most expensive products.