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REBECCA PERA

WHEN CONSUMERS GET CREATIVE

Cocreation in the individual and collective realm

preface

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Preface

*Daniele Dalli**

This study deals with the theme of creativity and the contribution that consumers make to it. For a long time, the subject has been a matter of debate in different disciplinary areas; contributions arrive from management, design and technology, others from economics and sociology. Only recently, such different perspectives have been framed under a unifying paradigm, the *cocreation* one. Broadly speaking, *cocreation* refers to the phenomenon according to which the traditional economic fences, those that separate suppliers and clients, producers and consumers, economic exchange and social exchange, are losing relevance. This occurs because of an “emerging creativity” which generates value for goods and services through the collaboration and interaction among several different subjects, belonging to very different institutional contexts. Innovation is no longer led by companies and organized within their organizational hierarchies. It takes place, instead, in hybrid contexts (economic and social) where end consumers play increasingly a leading role. As such, the term consumer cannot be interpreted in a neo-classical sense, as the subject who consumes, uses and ultimately appropriates the utility embedded in products and services. Rather, it must be read in a wider sense, recognizing that consumers play an active

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role in creating value. Consumers create value around goods and services offered by companies in countless ways: they contribute to the definition of technical specifications, to the definition of price, to the design of communication, to the enactment of pre and post-sales services, and so on. Conversely, in some cases, they contribute to reducing the value of assets. This occurs when the relationship with the companies providing the products or services does not correspond to criteria of fairness, mutual recognition, and collaboration.

The convergence of studies on creativity towards the cocreation strand is theoretically explained, with scholars by various backgrounds who, on the basis of the contributions of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000, 2004), have first placed consumer creativity and innovation on the same level of the corporate ones. Such research stream highlights the importance and the necessity of the integration of consumer creativity and innovation, which, with a series of technological and institutional changes has seen individuals undertake personal and professional innovative trajectories of value generation in a broad sense. Perhaps, the first example is the Innocentive platform, an independent business since 2001, which was founded by Lilly with the aim to organize the work of a multitude of freelance researchers who contributed to the innovation processes in the pharmaceutical field. Since this first platform many others in various fields were generated, from technology to the arts, from production to communication. They all have in common the facilitation of bridging creative consumers with business. In these platforms a synthesis is made between individual initiatives (personal and professional growth paths) and collective phenomena (innocrowding, crowd sourcing, and so on) with the formation of real communities that act as partners and sometimes as business counterparts.

Considering the creativity of consumers as one of the most important engines for cocreation means rewriting or modifying certain economic and managerial theory assumptions. It also

determines important implications regarding the actions of companies and institutions. First, it involves revisiting the concept of the market which cannot be seen as an area of confrontation between supply and demand, rather a hybrid institution in which economic and social exchanges coexist. The contributions of sociology and anthropology to the study of markets have been essential to understand the ways in which consumers contribute to the cocreation of the value provided by suppliers. The theories on competition have therefore opened not only to the simultaneous presence of competition and cooperation between companies and institutional partners (companies, public and non-profit organizations), but also to the inclusion of customers – and in particular end consumers – not only as stakeholders, but as real partners to be engaged and actively included in the processes of innovation and creation of value. A growing openness towards the “outside” of the company, which goes beyond merely economic and commercial logics is therefore occurring.

Consequently, by changing such basic theoretical elements, the implications for practitioners will necessarily be relevant and must adapt to such change. In this direction, this essay helps to review and redefine some important aspects of the companies’ organizational roles and functions involved in the management of the exchange processes (marketing, commercial) and innovation (R & D, production). Practitioners within these roles and functions will be increasingly focused in the engagement of consumers and their involvement in the cocreation processes and less in the management of the internal value chain, with substantial effects on cost structure and metrics to be used to evaluate labor productivity. As a corollary, dealing with consumers implies a background (education and experience) that cannot be limited to the technical dimension, be it managerial, engineering or scientific, but can range from social sciences, to humanistic and legal subjects. These skills are necessary to

ensure an effective integration of consumers in the processes of cocreation. Conversely, the risk is that these actors, become antagonists and “destroyers” of value, instead of partners, and generators of value.

Another substantial aspect illustrated in the present volume is the distinction between the individual and collective dimensions of creativity: the author emphasizes with efficacy and clarity that these two dimensions are both essential to the success of cocreative innovation projects. The rules of psychology regarding the consumer/cocreator must be respected and, at the same time, marketing managers need to contribute by facilitating the organizing of groups and communities in a harmonious and effective manner with respect to the related business processes.

Finally, in the conclusions the author appropriately pays attention to a critical dimension of cocreation processes. In the relationship between business and the crowd there is an irreducible conflict area due to the interests of the parties involved that – under certain conditions – can be unaligned or even incompatible. The literature provides numerous cases in which large national and international groups, armed with the best intentions, have tried to engage end consumers to discover then that this openness can generate spaces of conflict, even very harsh. Taking a critical perspective requires to consider cocreation as an opportunity that needs to be evaluated with great caution and balance, where the collaboration with consumers cannot be taken for granted and – above all – that their willingness to be engaged is not “unconditional”, rather it depends on the satisfaction of needs, expectations and conditions of reciprocity.

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