Who’s Your Crowd? The Use of Virtual Private Expert Networks

by Amy Kenly

This week I’m attending the PDMA Conference on Social Product Development and Co-Creation. One of my favorite speakers on the Monday agenda was Ben Kaufman, the founder and CEO of Quirky. Ben is a fantastic speaker and clearly brings a high level of enthusiasm to his company and the idea of accessible innovation.

Quirky won a Spike Award in 2010 for their unique business model, which makes invention accessible by partnering with creative people around the world to bring new products to life. Each week, Quirky engages its online community to collaborate in all aspects of product design and development - from ideation all the way to packaging. Quirky brings two brand new consumer products to market every week and shares the revenue with all of the individuals who were influential in bringing these products to life.

Ben is careful to point out that Quirky does not crowdsourc e innovation; it enables a collaborative process that makes innovation accessible. He says that crowdsourcing assumes that the community is smarter than the experts, and Quirky focuses on connecting experts with the community.

This certainly works for the Quirky model, which helps individuals with great ideas get help with the in-depth design, marketing and other back-end activities that often inhibit new ideas from ever leaving the drawing board. But what about applying crowdsourcing or co-creation to businesses that are trying to either innovate new products or enhance their existing internal product development processes? They also need help from experts to get products to the next step, but may not be able to hire these experts full-time.

I think that one of the most promising business models I’ve heard that supports this is around virtual private expert networks, where companies crowdsource a defined network of people with deep expertise in their industry. The crowd in this sense provides the specific knowledge and experience to help generate and analyze ideas, iterate and fine-tune concepts, and provide the collective brain power to help get the best innovations into the pipeline. The virtual private expert model makes innovation accessible to companies by engaging an expert “crowd” to enable the collaborative process.

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What’s your view? Add your question or comment
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