The Front End of Innovation: Not So “Fuzzy” Anymore

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Over the years, capabilities around the front end of innovation (FEI) have evolved significantly. Considerable knowledge, leading practices and case studies are now broadly available, helping to make the front end less “fuzzy.” There are dedicated conferences, popular blogs, and a wide body of academic literature devoted to the topic. We are now able to analyze global trends, source ideas and inspiration from communities of consumers, customers and suppliers, and gain deep insights with consumer immersion.

With all of this at our fingertips, one would imagine that companies have mastered the ability to develop new platform ideas that launch multiple generations of successful, significant innovation.

They haven’t.

Many organizations still struggle to utilize ideas and share insights across their organization. Even after all the work to make the front end less fuzzy, a significant percentage of innovation launched is still not successful in market. New technologies generate so much new information every day that it is nearly impossible to keep up with all of the available consumer insights.

What is still preventing organizations from delivering results? Why can’t they take advantage of the FEI tools and techniques so readily available today?

Why FEI is Still a Challenge

Even leading innovators struggle to apply the best front end practices broadly across their organizations. There are pockets of excellence, but learnings are not evenly applied. The siloed structure of many organizations causes data and knowledge to become trapped within the walls of various functions or business units. Innovation is a team sport, so this compartmentalized learning stifles results.

Even when an idea results in a successful launch, the insights, approaches and processes used to generate the success are lost over time. This organizational amnesia prevents companies from repeating what works and causes duplication of previous work and research.

How can companies overcome amnesia and a siloed mentality? How can they learn from previous initiatives and spread those insights across the organization?

When Information Systems Help

It’s impossible to manually manage the massive amounts of information generated from global innovation efforts in a way that can be effectively reused across multiple silos for multiple years. Large-scale information systems can help handle the volume of data and users required to mobilize this information.

Information systems enable virtual ideation sessions with internal and external contributors around the world. Ideas can be shared, co-developed, pruned, expanded and moved into commercialization. They can be captured and linked to test results, then shared across business units, geographies, products and importantly, across time.
Big data is also evolving rapidly, with the promise of generating tremendous new insights on consumer needs, behaviors and the trends influencing them. The ever-growing sources of data are smarter and more connected, allowing for more specific queries tied across multiple platforms.

There is a great potential to use these systems for breakthrough innovation. But information systems alone aren’t enough.

**Designing the Organization for Results**

Too often, organizations are only focused on implementing a new process or the latest information system to address their innovation challenges. They forget to plan how they will use the process or tool to deliver the results they promised in the first place.

At most companies, the organization to support the system doesn’t exist. The systems aren’t supported as new initiatives take funding priority. Project owners are part time and, despite good intentions, are too busy to maintain a measure–analyze–act cycle. This diminishes the opportunity to create an organization with a relentless focus on delivering results by constantly learning, sharing and reapplying.

Information systems aren’t valuable as enablers unless they are used and integrated into the way an organization does its work. To design your organization for success, address some basic questions including:

- What are the organizational behavior changes necessary to drive adoption?
- Who is going to own the effort to make sure it delivers as promised?
- How will you measure, analyze and act on the ideas generated and their impact on in-market success?
- How will learnings be broadly shared, acted on and embedded into how the organization does its work?
- How will future improvements to the process and system be funded? Will it be left to slowly decay?

Include answers in your implementation plans and don’t drop your plan after a short half-life.

**Getting Started**

Take a holistic look into your innovation processes, systems, capabilities and results at the front end. Ask yourself if they are delivering the business and innovation results you expect to achieve. Is your organization reapplying approaches that have led to success? Avoiding what hasn’t? Experimenting to anticipate the future?

The secret to making front end deliver on your expectations is to get answers to these questions and execute on them with excellence.