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Ideas: Dream Catching

by Tore Strandvik and Anu Helkkula

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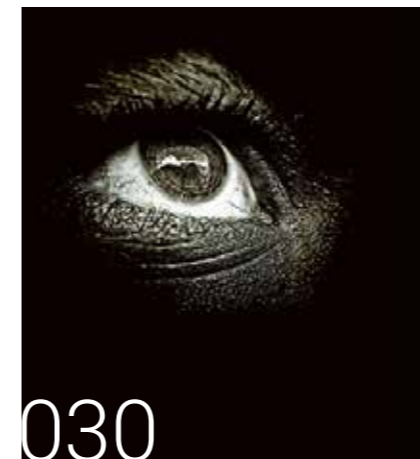


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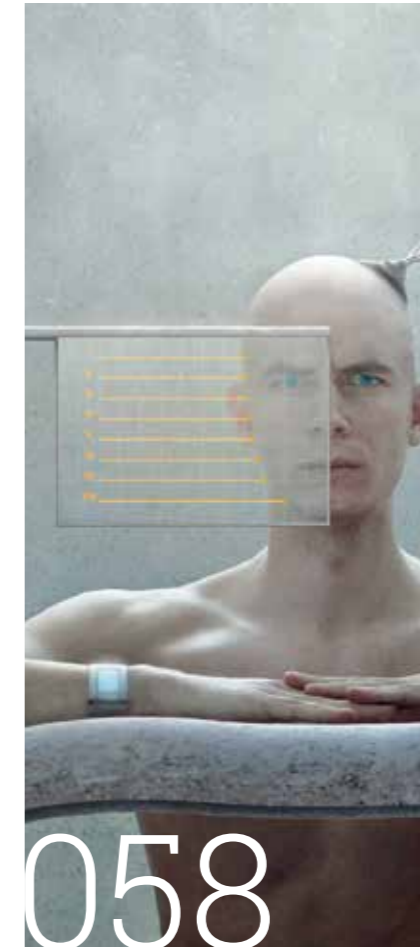
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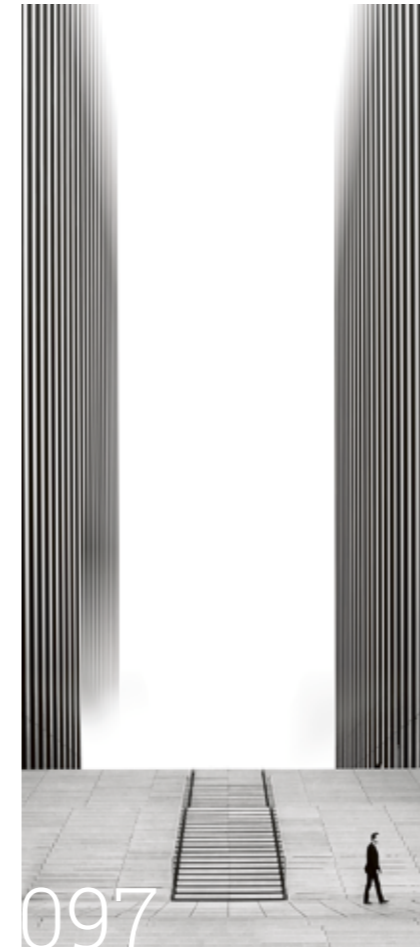
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DREAM CATCHING

Tore Strandvik and Anu Helkkula put forward a new idea of how to discover innovations that customers will buy.

It is well known that most innovations never succeed. Still, in increasingly dynamic markets, companies need to continuously introduce innovative offerings. The hidden dream of companies is to create innovations that customers will actually buy and that would give the company at least a transient advantage over competitors. So, how can that be done?

Recent business research has called for customer insight beyond what has traditionally been labeled as customer orientation or customer centrality in order to create innovations that customers will buy. Some researchers suggest that customers should become involved in the company's innovation processes. Others take a more radical approach by suggesting instead that companies need to understand how they can become involved in the customers' processes.

We believe that instead of focusing on the needs, wants and expectations of the here and now, companies should take a shot at understanding what customers are really dreaming about. Insight may come from understanding what customers wish to become true, in other words what they are dreaming about. It is necessary to dig deep into both the customers' current life and dreams when innovating new offerings.

Customers may not be able to articulate their dreams, or suggest a solution to achieve them, but dreams give them energy and direction. More importantly, customers recognize a solution when they see one. The challenge for companies is that they have neither the mindset nor tools to identify and catch their customers' dreams in order to create offerings that fulfill them. We believe that it is worthwhile to invest in and reach beyond what is commonly in use today. Effective dream catching may be a way to gain a competitive advantage.

But, to capitalize on the idea of revealing customer dreams, some aspects must be considered. First, dreams are imaginary and subjective in nature, and anchored and embedded in the customers' lives and context of living. This applies both to consumer and business customers. The first challenge then for companies is to start thinking about their offerings in terms of what value they bring to the customer when customers' use the offering. The word use here does not refer only to functional issues, but also to symbolic and emotional issues. Thus, it is essential to understand the customer's logic, how customers make sense of their activities and manage their processes.



A dream catcher is a "device" created by Native Americans that separates good dreams from bad. The device allows the good dreams to reach the dreamer while trapping the bad dreams and making them disappear at dawn.

ARTWORK BY SVETLAYA BLAVATSKAYA

When companies observe their customers' current behavior only, they are not able to interpret what is behind the behavior expressed. Companies therefore need to understand their customers, but the methods for achieving this understanding have not changed. Many companies continue to rely on familiar but ineffective research techniques and consequently misread customers' actions and thoughts.

Alternative methods can be employed. For example, narrative techniques, where customers are asked to tell stories about challenges in their lives and imaginary solutions to these challenges, may help the company to access their customers' hidden dreams. Sometimes, customers may not be able to express what they would buy without trying out a new offering, as value is revealed only when the offering is used in the customer's context. In this case, observation methods can be used to understand the reactions of real users to the offering in their own contexts.

The Marketing Department at Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki, Finland, collaborates with service and industrial companies in Tekes (the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation) projects, where the experiential nature of purchasing and using offerings has been pinpointed as being in contrast to the concept of "needs". A current project is working on dream catching in order to discover innovations that customers will buy. The implication for companies is that it is essential to use techniques to catch their customers' dreams in order to be part of their lives. ■

IDEAS