

Eating a beetle: How to get your radical ideas accepted

How do organisations like Apple get new ideas accepted by the public to the extent that they want to buy them?

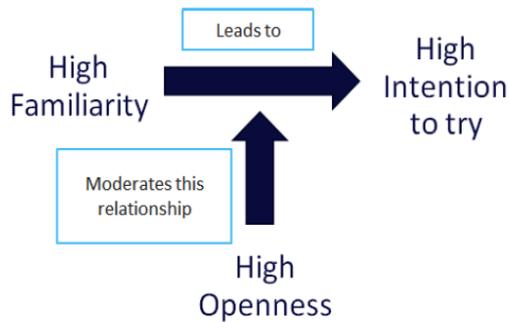
Using the example of entomophagy (people eating insects), a new research study has shown how managers and marketers can use psychology to help break a product to the public domain that is considered to be outside current cultural norms and experience.



In an intriguing thesis entitled 'Cricket lollipops and mealworm chocolate: investigating receptivity to radically creative products' Shreya Zaveri from the University of Pennsylvania examined how a number of small companies around the US have brought insect derivative food products to market in the western world. In East Asia and Africa, insects are just another source of protein and importantly, calcium. However to a sensitive market like the US the public is a little queasy at the thought of eating insects, despite certain common food additives being harvested from insects, often unknown to the public. For example, red food dyes used in food and drinks to enhance the look of meat, sausages, processed poultry products, surimi, marinades, alcoholic drinks, bakery products and toppings, cookies, desserts, icings, pie fillings, jams, preserves, gelatine desserts, juice beverages, varieties of cheddar cheese and other dairy products, sauces and sweets all comes from ground up cochineal beetle.

The researcher argued that sushi was a radical departure from cultural norms in the 1960s, and something for only the avant garde and those who had been to Japan to eat. Now one can get sushi from your local supermarket and most people don't turn their heads over it.

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The hypothesis

The argument put by Zaveri is that sushi is now a very familiar concept to the general public, so with high familiarity there is a high intention to try. This is why so many people eat it.

In order to get to that stage you need the early adopters of the food world who are open to new experiences.

Openness is not enough

Through a survey of 114 people Zaveri showed that familiarity is a key component when trying to get people to try new things: “people are indeed more likely to try a more familiar product, and this is regardless of whether they have been primed for openness or what their personal threshold for openness to experience or resistance to change is.”

However, the openness to experience hypothesis on its own did not stand up in her research. She concluded, “I doubt that openness would moderate the radicalness of the product so much that even a participant scoring high in openness would be willing to try the extremely novel alternative.”



How to break something extremely radical to the public?

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Zaveri believes that sometime in the next decade there will be a breakthrough and the US public will consider eating insects as normal as raw tuna. Getting to that breakthrough moment will be more of a war of attrition with marginal gains. She advised, “companies should investigate the potential greater openness to experience or low resistance to change of certain potential target markets, such as international travellers or diasporic communities from places that have an insect eating history.”



Beyond eating insects there is a whole wealth of ideas and products that seem too radical today but will be acceptable at some stage in the future. A classic example was the Sinclair C5 electric tricycle in the 1980s which was a step too far then, but the international delivery company UPS is using a very similar trike to deliver parcels around certain European cities today and electrically powered vehicles are now becoming sought after products.

The key then to getting radical ideas accepted appears to be down to familiarity. Exposing your ideas to the world and then keep going and keep modifying. If early adopters, those open to new ideas won't accept the idea initially you have even further to go... and to wait.

So the key question appears to be how can I get people to become familiar enough with the idea?

Conclusions

Where Zaveri thought she had a magic bullet for marketing and psychology at the outset of her research, that openness to experience, which is a psychological state, was enough on its own to have an idea accepted was disproved with her study. It really does appear that familiarity with similar ideas is more important for acceptance than psychological openness.

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Reference

Zaveri, S (2016) Cricket lollipops and mealworm chocolate: investigating receptivity to radically creative products. Wharton Research Scholars repository.

Overview

In order to get radical ideas, products and solutions accepted they need to have an air of familiarity about them. Drawing on the similarity of the idea with other everyday ideas, products or solutions is the best way to get acceptance.

Relying on people who have high levels of the psychological trait 'openness to experience' to open the door for you is not enough and unlikely to work as a strategy on its own.