研究室訪問

Who Comes up with Ideas that Lead to Innovation?

A Chance Remark

When I was a junior in 1990, in one of Professor Itami's seminars I remarked, "The Mitsubishi Pajero is designed for use in the mountains, so why do young people like to drive it around town?" "That's an interesting point," was the professor's succinct response. This was the genesis of the research theme for the doctoral thesis I wrote 17 years later. I started from the premise that the aims of the engineers who make a product do not always match the way that consumers use it.

The Pajero was developed with off-road use in mind, but in reality it also became popular with regular drivers who had no interest in off-roading. User views were fed back to the engineers, and the Pajero evolved into more of a general-use vehicle. The process prompted technical innovation by Mitsubishi Motors Corporation. The same thing has happened repeatedly in various product categories. This led me to the concept of "user innovation," where users take the initiative in technological change.

Does Product Improvement Always Start with Experts?

My research focuses on marketing from a user innovation approach. I used to work for Hakuhodo, an advertising agency with particular strengths in marketing, where I spent about 10 years gaining practical experience in the marketing field. Over the following decade I pursued research, including study abroad. During my time at Hakuhodo, my research topic was innovation. People tend to think of innovation as always starting with technical experts, but I began to question whether in reality it sometimes occurs in other places. Who exactly takes the lead in innovation?

Japanese companies have a reputation for their strengths in *kaizen*, or continuous improvement. Consider the motive for such improvement. Previous academic research has talked about a pool of tacit knowledge in factories, but do engineers always have a thirst for improvement that motivates them to innovate? I do not believe that this is the case. I think they have a more straightforward desire to use their technical skills to delight others. I think engineers' awareness of the need for improvement can start from something as simple as a casual comment from a family member suggesting a way of making the product handier. In other words, we could say that the seeds of improvement are found not so much in the engineers themselves, but in the users they interact with.

Consumers Have Their Own Thoughts on Product Use

When a company launches a new product, people referred to as "innovators" snap it up. At first they use the product in accordance with the manufacturer's intentions, but sooner or later they devise their own ways of using it. Mobile phones were originally developed to enable people to communicate on the move, but various other functions have since been added, such as enabling users to send photographs and decorative text messages or choosing their own ring tones. Why do such phenomena occur? They may have been sparked by a bit of gossip. Or they may have stemmed from a certain person having an interesting idea. If we investigate the sources of such innovations, in many cases they were thought up by product users. The origins of mobile phones with cameras lie in users pasting their favorite photos into the wallpaper screen. However, this was a very time-consuming process, so someone thought it would be a good idea to build a camera into the phone,

enabling users to paste their photos into the wallpaper screen whenever they wanted. Examining such cases reveals many examples where users came up with ways of using a product that differed from the intentions and assumptions of the developers, and where this led to hit products.

Circulation of Information is an Unchanging Principle

Users form an important part of the technological innovation process by existing alongside engineers and understanding their aims, while also exploring different ways of using products. Such individuals do not have technology, but they have the capacity to introduce and circulate good ideas, adding things that may not occur to technical specialists. This is a crucial role.

Japan's era of high economic growth was characterized by social cohesion and stable work environments. For example, if Dad developed a product at work, his family would critique it at home. Dad would pass these comments on to his workmates, and this would trigger new innovations. If people noticed inconveniences around town, that information would soon be communicated to local governments and companies, leading to improvements. The flow of information deteriorates as societies become more individualistic, and media for picking up information have changed. However, the principle remains the same even as times change: circulating information to others gives birth to new innovations.

Ideas sparked in this way need to be communicated to as many people as possible. Even half-baked ideas can snowball into something bigger and spread far and wide. This is how real innovation begins. The capacity to spread ideas in this way used to be one of Japan's strengths.

Although this process is generally categorized as part of marketing, in reality it is linked to innovation and to various other elements of business including organizational structure and human resource development.

Overcoming the "Technology Complex" to Obtain Primary Information

Since marketing is the study of markets, in looking at gaining sources of information we must examine the places were goods are bought and sold. Obtaining primary information is vital, so we have to talk with companies and consumers, investigate actual phenomena, and communicate these. We first make sure that students understand the importance of this right from the start, and then show them real workplaces and give them opportunities to meet technical specialists. This enables them to ask about issues that engineers face in their work.

Chat in the Den

Students need to question why the engineers are making this product. Perhaps an affiliate has asked or compelled them to make it. Maybe they are following a trend, or just trying to make sure a competitor does not beat them to it. In other words, they may not necessarily be thinking about the consumers who will use the product. Getting to know engineers in this way does not require technical knowledge. It is important to free ourselves from any complex we may have about not understanding advanced technologies because we are not scientists and to think about how our own work can be useful to engineers.

Consider some consumer trends in recent years. Lightness was one of the key selling points of the iPad, yet some people attach covers that are heavier than the tablet itself. Rather than simply questioning this phenomenon, we need to look deeper and consider why users don't like the original silver body. Maybe they just want a cover, or perhaps they are trying to express their individuality. It is crucial to identify their motivation, and to communicate it.

People say that professional photographers often find their own ways of using cameras that differ from the functions envisaged by the manufacturers. There are probably lots of reasons for this. However, if we question a little more deeply, we find that these ways of using the camera are not only the result of fussiness, but of striving for greater ease of use. Before long they talk to others, and soon the camera is being used in that way not only by professionals, but also by regular consumers. Then manufacturers have no choice but to respond. This leads to innovation.

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Born in 1968. After graduating from the Hitotsubashi University Faculty of Commerce and Management in 1991, he joined Hakuhodo Inc. and worked in the Marketing Division. Became a researcher at the Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Living in 1999. Appointed as visiting researcher in Comparative Media Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003. Returned to Hakuhodo Inc. as a senior researcher in the R&D Division. Completed a Ph.D. at the University of Tokyo Graduate School of Arts & Sciences in 2008, and became a Senior Researcher at Hakuhodo Innovation Lab in 2009. In 2010, he was appointed as a temporary member of the Fundamental Issues Subcommittee of the Industrial Structure Council convened by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Took up an associate professorship at the Graduate School of Commerce and Management at Hitotsubashi University in 2011. Publications include *Mirai o dosatsu suru* (Gaining Future Insight) (NTT Publishing, 2007). Received an incentive prize in the sociology division of the 7th Docomo Mobile Science Prize in 2008.