

# Chapter 17

## Significance of Proactive Customer Orientation in Creating Product Innovations in Cooperation with the Consumer



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**Abstract** Introducing new, innovative products to the market is nowadays a necessary condition for development in a saturated and demanding market. Customers' expectations are constantly growing, which results in a need for constant reaction to them better than competition does. Customers, by making choices concerning a countless number of goods, demand satisfaction by being ensured both articulated and hidden needs. An interactive dialogue with a consumer, making use of the knowledge it provides, may become a source of leverage in creating innovation. Customer orientation is one of the key elements of an innovative company, and one can also observe its significance in creating new products. The aim of this paper is to diagnose the dependence between proactive customer orientation and creating product innovation in cooperation with consumers in companies from the FMCG sector. The study was conducted on a sample of 165 companies. The results indicate that there is a positive correlation between proactive customer orientation and (a) the evaluation of the significance of the buyers' knowledge in creating product innovations, (b) the number of buyers' sources of knowledge used and finally (c) the assessment of the degree of realising the objectives concerning product innovations. These results suggest that proactive customer orientation seeking cooperation with the consumer can influence the market success of product innovations that are created in cooperation.

**Keywords** Proactive customer orientation · Product innovation

### 17.1 Introduction

Innovation is commonly believed to be the key source of competitive advantage in the increasingly turbulent environment [4, 22, 36]. Porter [28] claimed that “competitive advantage is created by the value that a company is capable of creating for

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its customers". Growing customers' expectations and competitive pressure are factors which modify companies' strategies [19] and encourage them to take special interest in customer-oriented strategies. Minding the satisfaction, and consequently, loyalty of their customers, companies strive to constantly provide new solutions in order to cater for the buyers' needs, both the articulated and hidden, as well as future ones [4]. A growing number of companies try to understand the expectations of their customers basing them on relationships, meeting them, creating laboratories or other places where one can observe, identify problems and test solutions. The actions lead to the emergence of numerous innovative products, which are enthusiastically received by markets. The presented approach defines them as proactive customer orientation [4, 24].

During recent decades, there has been a notable interest in innovations and cooperation with customers in the process of creating them [16, 27]. Many of the studies published so far concerned primarily the relations between capabilities and organisational culture and orientation towards the customer with innovative activity. Some studies have proven that there was a strong correlation between orientations towards the customer with innovative outcomes. The studies also indicate that the efficiency of new products can be increased by cooperation with customers by proactive orientation towards them. The extension of the topic of creating product innovations in cooperation with consumer of the FMCG sector seems to be interesting.

The research gap still requires exploration of the influence of proactive customer orientation on creating product innovation in cooperation with consumers by companies from the FMCG sector.

In the course of this study, a review of subject literature has been conducted, along with a presentation of empirical research findings related to innovation and the brand-related strategies employed by companies from the FMCG sector, with special focus on diagnosing the significance of proactive customer orientation in the process of creating product innovations by companies. The aim of this study is to diagnose the relationship between proactive customer orientation and the creation of product innovations in cooperation with consumers in FMCG sector enterprises.

## **17.2 Orientation Towards the Customer—Theoretical Background**

The innovative potential, and at the same time, the prospects for growth and development are influenced, among others, by the culture of an organisation open to changes in the environment [34]. It refers to the values and beliefs that shape the norms of desired behaviours followed by employees [33, p. 580]. Empirical evidence suggests that a company which develops pro-innovation culture may achieve better market and financial outcomes, as well as organisational effectiveness [11, 17, 26, 37]. Pro-innovative organisational culture is a set of shared beliefs and concords within an organisation which determine all its actions embedded in formal and informal

systems, behaviours, competences and processes, and which inspire the search and implementation of innovations [6, 31, p. 1133–1141].

Despite a common agreement that orientation towards the customer may have influenced a company's efficiency, some scholars suggest a direct dependence between the two factors [3, 8, 20], while others claim that orientation towards the customer has varying influence on efficiency-related figures depending on environmental factors and the sector of economy [15].

Engaging in activities that could result in innovative outcomes has become a key imperative for many firms [18]. The ability to predict the customers' needs and reacting to them faster than competitors should generate great benefits for innovation-oriented companies [31]. An increasing number of companies actively identifies and anticipates their customers' needs and reacts appropriately to them, creating greater value for the buyers [22].

Orientation towards the customer refers to a set of actions which put the customer's best interest in the key position, in order to reach a strong competitive position [9, p. 27]. Brady and Cronin [5] noticed that a customer-oriented company benefits from concentrating on the customer, both directly and indirectly. Recent studies in the field of marketing of relations suggest that orientation towards the customer may lead to gaining competitive advantage by exploiting a strong and trustful relation between a company and its customers [30]. On the other hand, involved customers, who believe in the seller's honesty and competence, are key factors for exploration of the company's value. Griffith and Harvey [12] suggested that orientation towards the consumer influences the development and reinforcement of a customer's trust for a company, which in turn has an impact on a company's dynamic potential and efficiency.

Narver et al. [24] define two types of orientation towards the customer: proactive and responsive. The latter one refers to the supplier's ability to effectively react for the purpose of catering for the needs articulated the customers. Proactive orientation, on the other hand, is defined as the supplier's ability to constantly check the customers' hidden needs and discovering the future ones, or possibly offering ideas before the customers realise that they have such a need; from the customer's point of view, it reflects the customers' opinions that suppliers have proactive processes and abilities fit for anticipating the hidden and future needs.

Such a distinction appears to be relevant, as reacting to the needs demonstrated by customers does not take into account consumers' hidden needs, which are potentially important, but hard to articulate [32]. It is a field in which proactive customer orientation plays a crucial role and gains significance in the process ensuring the success of new products [2]. The manufacturer's ability to discover hidden needs by proactive dialogue, conducting consumer surveys or ethnographic studies may reveal early signals concerning customers' needs [32].

The studies conducted by Blocker et al. indicate that customers expect proactive market orientation from manufacturers and are in addition eager to share knowledge, talk about their needs and get involved in creating innovations. The key effect of proactive customer orientation is the involvement of consumers to jointly create product innovations.

### 17.3 Cooperation with Customers in the Process of Creating Product Innovations

In order to ensure and maintain a strong competitive position, companies must be able to innovate faster and more effectively than competitors. The potential should allow a company to enter a new market, offer new products, reach a new level faster than their competition, or improve the quality before their rivals [22]. The strategy of innovation refers to the innovative position devised by a company, which depends on the competitive environment of its assets and competences [16]. According to Oslo methodology [25], there are four types of innovation:

1. product-related—introduction into a market a product or a service which is novel or significantly improved in terms of their features or uses;
2. process-related—implementation of a novel or significantly improved method of production or delivery;
3. organisational—implementation of new methods of company management, which concerns changes in organisation of workplace or relationships with the company's environment;
4. marketing-related—implementing a new marketing method involving significant changes in the product's design/structure, packaging, distribution, promotion or pricing strategy.

Those four groups of innovations are further divided into technological and non-technological. Technological innovations include product and process innovations, whereas non-technological ones concern organisation and marketing. In this paper, the emphasis is on product innovations.

In marketing-related literature, there is common agreement that knowledge of the market and cooperation between functions are two basic assets which enable successful product innovations [2]. A high level of innovativeness also provides companies with the ability to shape the consumers' preferences and know their basic behaviours and expectations, in order to follow the directions which ensure advantage over others [1, 29]

Currently, the localisation of innovative processes has too large extent undergone a shift from the inside of a company to the inter-organisational space, with integrated relations between manufacturers and their environment allowing companies to gain sustainable competitive advantage [10, 36]. Researchers who study company development strategies more and more frequently focus on cooperation with customers undertaken for the purpose of creating value [13, 27, 35].

Users are considered to be an important source of innovation, and with increased frequency, cooperation with them is becoming a crucial element of companies' innovative strategies [23]. Customer integration in the process of innovation provides new ideas and opportunities to better understand the users' needs and expectations. That cooperation allows a company to make sure that it responds to the market's needs and thus avoids potential losses resulting from faults in creating their offer [14].

Users are one of the key sources of knowledge, with the ability to include end consumers into all stages of the innovation process being considered a relevant factor of innovation capabilities [7]. A thorough insight into consumers' needs is relevant for the success of new products, with a company being able to develop its competence in this field by intense searching for knowledge about a consumer and by cooperation in the creative process.

Cooperation with consumers aimed at creating new products facilitates the market adaptability of those products. An involved customer may provide immense contribution to creating product innovations. In addition, having high product awareness users participate in the creation of innovations which are better tailored, and thus accepted by other users. That is why companies more and more often engage in cooperation with their customers and are increasingly eager to make use of different sources of the users' knowledge.

Proactive customer orientation aimed at the best possible understanding of the needs and expectations of users manifests itself by inviting them to cooperate in creating product innovations. The factor that shows both the willingness to cooperate and how it is implemented is, above all, the assessment of the importance of the knowledge of consumers in creating product innovations. Other indicators that suggest cooperation are the number of sources of knowledge used by users.

Bearing in mind the above elaborations, the following hypotheses have been put forward:

*H1. There is a positive correlation between proactive customer orientation and the evaluation of the significance of consumers' knowledge in creating innovations*

*H2. There is a positive correlation between proactive customer orientation and the number of sources of consumers' knowledge used*

*H3. There is a positive correlation between proactive customer orientation and the extent of realizing the objectives concerning product innovations.*

## **17.4 Cooperation with Consumers in the Process of Creating Product Innovations**

For the purposes of the implementation of the research objective, we made a review of national and foreign literature and we also applied thought mapping. Cognitive methods were supported by our own research. This study aims to diagnose the importance of knowledge gained from consumers in the process of creating product innovations by enterprises from the FMCG sector.

Representatives of management staff of companies operating in Poland's FMCG sector were invited to participate in a study carried out in the period from January 2016 to February 2017. The selection of the sample was deliberate. The study covered those companies that were assessed by their management boards as innovative ones. Yet another criterion for eligibility for participation in the study was the launch of new products in the last three years. Taking into account the research objectives

and the deliberateness of the sample, we decided to choose the interview method implemented via the Internet (CAWI) as our information collection method. In the case when contacting a respondent was problematic, the computer-aided telephone interview (CATI) method was applied. In each case, the same interview questionnaire was used. The survey was carried out using the questionnaire method. Although this article presents partial results of the empirical research conducted, they allowed us to evaluate the sources and inspiration of product innovations in the FMCG sector. Altogether, 165 observations were taken into account. Table 17.1 presents the characteristics of the test sample.

FMCG, i.e. fast-moving consumer goods, is a sector of the economy that includes the so-called quickly tradable goods, also known as basic necessities. This group includes various and broad categories of goods such as food products, beverages and spirits, tobacco products, cosmetics, personal hygiene articles, household chemicals and over-the-counter drugs. These are products whose unit price is not high and are bought in mass quantities. Taking into account the dynamics of the FMCG market development, the global character of all social, political and industrial changes, the brand gains importance as the main tool of competition and the key to the entrepreneurs' strategy. The things that change and how customers adapt their behaviour to new conditions are significant for companies and their brands. Abundant and accessible literature along with market examples prove the occurrence of a strong dependence between the creation of strong brands within the offer and the success achieved by the company [21].

Statistical analyses were carried out using the IBM SPSS Statistics version 24 software package. Altogether, 165 observations derived from enterprises operating

**Table 17.1** Characteristics of the enterprises surveyed ( $N = 165$ )

The questionnaire elements	Volume	Participation in %
<i>Enterprise size</i>		
– Small (10–49 employees)	69	41.82
– Medium (50–249 employees)	61	36.97
– Large (over 250 employees)	35	21.21
<i>Industry</i>		
– Groceries	80	48.48
– Household chemicals	11	6.67
– Personal hygiene articles	7	4.24
– Cosmetics	18	10.91
– Non-alcoholic beverages	22	13.34
– Beer	12	7.27
– Spirits	11	6.67
– Pet food	4	2.42

Source Elaborated by the authors based on the results of the study conducted

**Table 17.2** Descriptive statistics of the variables examined ( $N = 165$ )

Variable	Range	Min.	Max.	Average	M	D	Standard deviation	Variance
Proactive customer orientation	6.00	4.00	10.00	7.01	8	9	1.513	2.288
The assessment of the degree of the achievement of product innovation objectives	6.00	4.00	10.00	7.82	8	9	1.567	2.455
Market success for product innovations	6.00	4.00	10.00	6.77	7	8	1.492	2.227
The assessment of the importance of buyers' knowledge in creating product innovations	5.00	5.00	10.00	7.93	8	9	1.570	2.465
The number of used sources of buyers' knowledge	5.00	4.00	9.00	6.67	7	8	1.658	2.748
Social media activities	10.00	0.00	10.00	8.09	8	10	1.844	3.400
Customer expectations surveys	10.00	0.00	10.00	6.99	7	6	1.826	3.335
Customer satisfaction surveys	8.00	0.00	10.00	6.49	7	7	2.426	5.886
Co-creating new products	10.00	0.00	10.00	3.12	2	0	3.354	11.249
The information exchange platform	10.00	0.00	10.00	3.96	5	0	3.500	12.248
Helpline	8.00	0.00	8.00	0.29	0	0	1.142	1.305
Online forums	10.00	0.00	10.00	6.78	7	9	2.651	7.025
Testing of new products	10.00	0.00	10.00	5.53	6	0	3.773	14.239

Source Elaborated by the authors based on the results of the study conducted

in the FMCG sector were taken into account. Table 17.2 presents descriptive statistics of the variables examined.

### **17.5 Significance of Proactive Customer Orientation in the Process of Realising the Objectives Concerning Product Innovations—Conclusions from the Conducted Study**

The first variables examined were the factors determining cooperation with customers aimed at acquiring consumers' knowledge. They were assessed using an 11-point scale and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of reliability for the entire group of factors was 0.916. This result indicates the internal coherence of the factors analysed.

The study was started from an empirical problem in the study concerning implementation of proactive customer orientation in creating product innovations.

In order to determine whether in the enterprises examined there is a monotonic dependence between individual factors and proactive customer orientation, used the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The results obtained are contained in Table 17.3. They show that all factors are correlated with the proactive customer orientation with a positive and statistically significant relationship. The positive nature of these correlations means that the increases in individual factors in the field of cooperation with clients are accompanied by an increase in the level of the proactive customer orientation. When analysing the correlation strength for  $r$ , it should be noted that a moderate dependence (0.4–0.7) occurs in the case of such factors as testing of new products, the information exchange platform, co-creating new products, customer expectations surveys and online forums. A fairly strong dependence (0.7–0.9) was observed for factors: customer satisfaction surveys and social media activities. No factor was found with a very strong relationship.

The next step was to assess the dependence between the degree of the achievement of product innovation objectives, assessment of the importance of consumers' knowledge in creating product innovations, number of used sources of consumers' knowledge and proactive customer orientation, using the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The correlation coefficients between the factors are: 888\*\*, 943\*\* and 964\*\*, which indicate the existence of fairly strong dependences (Table 17.4).

**Table 17.3** Correlations between individual sources of acquiring knowledge from buyers and proactive customer orientation

Spearman's rho		Proactive customer orientation
Social media activities	Correlation coefficient	0.796**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
Customer expectations surveys	Correlation coefficient	0.670**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
Customer satisfaction surveys	Correlation coefficient	0.816**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
Co-creating new products	Correlation coefficient	0.677**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
The information exchange platform	Correlation coefficient	0.565**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
Helpline	Correlation coefficient	0.330**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
Online forums	Correlation coefficient	0.483**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
Testing of new products	Correlation coefficient	0.538**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000

\*\*Correlation significant at 0.01 (two-sided)

Source Elaborated by the authors

**Table 17.4** Correlations between the analysed factors and proactive customer orientation

Spearman's rho		Proactive customer orientation
The assessment of the importance of consumers' knowledge in creating product innovations	Correlation coefficient	0.943**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
	<i>N</i>	165
The assessment of the degree of the achievement of product innovation objectives	Correlation coefficient	0.964**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
	<i>N</i>	165
The number of used sources of consumers' knowledge	Correlation coefficient	0.888**
	Significance (two-sided)	0.000
	<i>N</i>	165

\*\*Correlation significant at 0.01 (two-sided)

Source Elaborated by the authors

## **17.6 Significance of Proactive Customer Orientation in the Process of Realising the Objectives Concerning Product Innovations—Conclusions from the Conducted Study**

The presented results do not give grounds for rejecting the accepted hypotheses H1 and H2 and H3. There is a positive relationship between proactive customer orientation and the reach of searching for sources of knowledge of consumers, the assessment of the importance of consumers' knowledge in creating product innovations and the assessment of the achievement of product innovation goals.

The implications of this study indicate that there is a positive correlation between proactive customer orientation and the evaluation of the significance of consumers' knowledge in creating innovations and the number of sources of consumers' knowledge used, as well as the extent of realising the objectives concerning product innovations. Thus, it seems relevant to assume that proactive orientation towards the customer by cooperation with consumers brings the desired outcomes in terms of realising the objectives concerning product innovations in companies from the FMCG sector.

In the context of conclusions from the conducted study, one should agree with the authors quoted [4, 24, 27, 35] that a consumer may be one of the creators of success in making and implementing product innovations. Proactive customer orientation and cooperation with the user in the process of creating product innovations can help companies formulate directions of their improvement. Thus, proactive customer orientation seems to be the direction which will be followed by an increasing number of companies which aim at market success.

The diagnosed direction and significance of pro-innovation organisational culture for ensuring the success of product and marketing innovations of companies functioning in the FMCG sector justify the need to tackle the research problem analysed in this study, while at the same time encouraging its further exploration, especially in order to formulate valuable recommendations for economic practice. A special opportunity for future studies concerns the role of managers in developing and supporting the culture of innovation.

It should be noted, however, that sector of fast-moving consumer goods is characterised by high volatility and enterprises operating in it represent a high level of innovation. Moreover, a certain limitation may be the deliberate selection of the sample, assuming that the study will involve enterprises that assessed themselves as innovative; therefore, an additional criterion is the introduction of new products during the period of the last three years.

The diagnosed direction, scope and strength of cooperation with the final client, aiming at creating product innovations in enterprises offering fast-moving products, justify the need for the research problem analysed in this study and at the same time encourage further recognition, especially for the purpose of formulating valuable recommendations for business practice. A special opportunity for future research concerns the role of managers in building and supporting proactive customer orientation and cooperation with consumers aimed at creating innovations.

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