Chapter 24
Empowering Members of a Brand Community to Gain Consumer Insights and Create New Products: The Case of the Vorwerk Thermomix Research Community

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Abstract Online Research Communities (ORCs) have ushered marketing research into a new era and are one of the fastest growing segments in the industry. ORCs offer a selected number of consumers a closed online environment in which they interact and co-create with the company not only in "one-off" projects but over an extended period of time. The approach distinguishes itself by the flexibility and diversity of market research methodologies that can be applied. In our case study, we describe the set up, live phase, and post-processing of the Vorwerk Thermomix Research Community. Over the duration of 3 weeks, Thermomix invited customers, who are also registered users of the brand's official online receipe community, to participate in a moderated ORC. There were two major goals. First, Thermomix wanted to understand consumers' "cooking journeys," i.e., learn how they decide what to cook, plan their cooking, buy groceries, etc. Second, Thermomix aimed to co-create with its customers and develop new features and functionalities for the Thermomix recipe community which serves as a central meeting place for cooking enthusiasts and brand fans. In the study, we show how the ORC was designed to answer our research questions and what methodological benefits the method yields. Furthermore, we investigate the user types that contributed to the platform most and provide insights into how to boost activity levels on the platform. In today's social media context, ORCs are a valuable tool for brands to connect with their customers and engage them in value creating activities. This chapter sheds light on this new research approach and unveils the potential of brand community members for insight generation and co-innovation.

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24.1   Introduction

Today, to many consumers it feels natural to actively produce content and publish it online (so called 'user-generated content'). This change in media behavior is even more impressive considering that only a few years back, the majority of people mainly consumed (i.e., read/watched) content online. When Wikipedia was launched—widely unnoticed at that time—users notified the webmasters that there was a security issue on the platform because they could actually change the content of the website themselves. What appears to be alienated and ridiculous in times of daily Facebook updates reflected a very common understanding of roles between consumers and producers—in the media business as well as in the new product development process in any other industry. With the rise of social media, a vast majority of consumers have gradually adopted the role of producers and gained experiences. For instance, they stage themselves on Facebook, write restaurant and hotel reviews, share updates about their lives on Twitter and comment on newspaper articles. This fundamental change in consumer behavior induced a radical shift of the role of consumers from purely consuming toward prosuming (produce + consume) actors on the market.

Confronted with this new breed of consumers, many companies are at a loss. The widespread and often purposeless striving for a large number of Facebook fans as a key performance indicator in social media embodies the current ambivalent attitude toward social media. Alerted by the growing impact of social media, companies precipitately implement social media strategies, but fall short of tapping the full potential. Just as in the old days, they often only see a crowd of willing recipients of communication messages and use social media channels as yet another way of distributing their own content. The game has changed, but they still play with the same old methods and tools from the pre-prosumer era.

24.2   Tools to Empower Consumers

More and more innovative companies, however, manage to overcome the learned definition and separation of consumer and producer roles and reciprocate appropriately (Bernoff and Li 2008; Fuchs et al. 2010). Consumers have proved to be valuable partners in new product development. They help companies to learn about future consumer needs (Bartl et al. 2012) and to innovate more effectively and efficiently, i.e., create desirable products in a shorter time (Bilgram et al. 2013). A number of different interaction modes have evolved which serve different purposes.

In the ideation process, for example, Innovation Contests are conducted to turn to a large crowd of creative or knowledgeable people with a specific innovation task or problem (Hutter et al. 2011). These contests are based on two core principles: Crowdsourcing and the concept of tournaments. The first principle refers to the

Table 24.1 Comparison of empowerment tools. *Source* By the author

Empowerment tool	Research community	Innovation contest
Method	• Asynchronous online research platform • Collaborative sessions and discussions	• Online crowdsourcing of an innovation task in a 'call for ideas' • Selection and rewarding the winners of the competition
Phase in value creation	• Definition of innovation fields • Selection and refinement of ideas	• Ideation of new product ideas
Involved individuals	• Users of a defined target group or existent customers	• Creative and skillful users
Outcome	• Consumer insights and needs • Evaluated and enriched ideas	• Hundreds of (visualized) innovative ideas • Underlying needs
User compensation	• Equal rewards for all active participants	• 'The winner(s) take(s) it all' principle of tournaments

outsourcing of creative tasks traditionally performed by the company itself to a large crowd of individuals outside the company by means of an open call. In order to address highly innovative users or even lead users, companies turn to established specialist communities such as Innocentive or Nine Sigma or call for ideas in relevant online communities and other social media sites. The second principle describes the reward system and the temporary nature of Innovation Contests. Only the best ideas submitted within the contest phase are rewarded or in other words 'the winner(s) take(s) it all' (Morgan and Wang 2010). Rewards can range from monetary incentives to brand-related prizes, internships at the company or the invitation to a special event (Füller 2010). This form of crowdsourcing is particularly suited to efficiently collect ideas or solutions to solve complex and novel problems (Boudreau and Lakhani 2013).

In contrast, so called Research Communities (Bernoff and Li 2008) are used to gain consumer insights and feedback on new product concepts (see Table 24.1). For this task, companies usually do not address the most innovative people, but the average customer who buys their products.

Research Communities have a collaborative nature encouraging a free-flowing discussion between participants and the company. An agenda for each day comprising various questions and tasks helps to guide the collaboration. Consumers not only interact with the company in a one-to-one question and answer type of research but enter into a many-to-many collaboration mode. Accordingly,

participants of this collaborative research platform are also rewarded differently. As opposed to the tournament principle, every participant of a Research Community receives a small incentive as a 'thank you' and a compensation for her efforts.

Online Research Communities have disrupted the market research industry and have become a significant mosaic of many companies' empowerment strategies. The fundamental change that Research Communities bring about is that they establish a co-creation environment enabling a meaningful dialog and interaction mode. They go beyond short encounters between brands and consumers and create a different experience for consumers than 'one-off' research initiatives such as surveys or focus groups. The continuity of the platform-based approach, the versatile research modules and the exchange with the company as well as with other consumers creates an inspiring atmosphere of being part of something meaningful—something that has an impact and adds value for oneself and the company.

24.3   The Vorwerk Thermomix Research Community

The Thermomix is a multifunctional food processor which has up to 12 functions, enabling consumers not only to mix ingredients but also to cook, knead, mix, beat, chop, grind, purée, weigh, and roast them. For years, the company Vorwerk Thermomix has been integrating users in innovation processes in order to better understand problems, needs, and wishes as well as to co-create new products and services. Among other things, the open business model involving thousands of enthusiastic Thermomix users who evangelize and sell the product may account for the company's consumer-centricity. Thus, the Thermomix business model is exclusively based on word of mouth referrals. The Thermomix cooking appliance cannot be bought in official stores or via online channels but is exclusively distributed by sales representatives.

The 'fuel' of the Thermomix usage are the special recipes which are specifically tailored to the Thermomix appliance. These recipes enable users to get the most out of the appliance and fulfill the promise of 'success guarantee.' Over the years, an enormous variety of recipes has been generated both by the company as well as by users. In the Vorwerk Thermomix brand community these recipes can be explored, shared, discussed and downloaded. More than 600,000 users worldwide are registered users of the brand community. In the frame of a global initiative aiming to improve the user experience of the recipe communities in particular search, understand user needs and preferences, Vorwerk Thermomix leveraged an Online Research Community to involve its customers.

In particular, Vorwerk Thermomix pursued the following objectives: First, understanding and analyzing users' cooking journey was a key goal. The cooking journey comprises several steps: Planning, (online) recipe search, decision making, cooking, evaluating the recipe, and finally managing and organizing the recipes. The main focus of the research was on the search phase within the cooking journey. The goal was to analyze user habits and identify different search types among users.

Second, the ORC aimed at collaboratively developing the new search for the community so that users find recipes they are looking for quickly and easily and collecting feedback on the interface, and attributes.

The case study is structured in five parts dealing with the people who participated in the ORC, the agenda that was conceived for the interaction with the customers and the platform which was designed to serve as a research environment. Subsequently, we describe the outcome of the ORC and share some lessons learned.

People

A key challenge at the beginning of a co-creation project is to identify and recruit suitable participants to collaborate with. Here, the Vorwerk Thermomix community 'Rezeptwelt' in Germany served as a base for the recruitment process. Out of a sample of 107,686 registered members (October 2012), 800 people were preselected as potential participants. Among other things, having been active in the Rezeptwelt community in the past 6 months was one of the preselection criteria to filter. The goal was to ensure quality of participants' feedback and to identify the most suitable participants for the ORC.

The selected customers received an invitation via direct message to fill in a prescreening questionnaire. In this message, the project's goals and requirements (active participation in the forum over 3 weeks) were briefly described. The prescreening questionnaire assessed a number of demographic variables (age, gender and Thermomix model), the activity level, cooking behavior, and the motivation to participate.

From a total of 113 Rezeptwelt members who completed the prescreening questionnaire and expressed their desire to participate in the project, 69 particularly motivated people were selected and invited to the Research Community. The majority of participants were female (94 vs. 6% male), with ages ranging between 21 and 70 years, while most of the participants were between 31 and 50 years old. Two-third of the participants visit the Rezeptwelt community and use their Thermomix at least three times a week and have been members of the Rezeptwelt community for more than 24 months.

Participants of the ORC were also analyzed regarding their activity in Vorwerk's continuous brand community Rezeptwelt (i.e., the community they were recruited from). Activities in the Rezeptwelt comprise the up- and download of recipes, comments and evaluations of recipes, and exchange of messages with other community members or friends. As shown in Fig. 24.1, 12% of the participating consumers are rather passive users in the Rezeptwelt and therefore called "Marginal activity users." An even smaller number of participants belong to the segment of "Heavy upstreamers." The main activity of this group relies on the active creation of content which they contribute to the community. This includes the number of published recipes, given comments, and recipe evaluations. In contrast to these relatively small groups, 38% of the ORC members belong to the group of "Heavy downstreamer"—a user segment best characterized by its downstream activities in terms of saving recipes. The largest user segment—with 40% of the participants— represents the group of "Extreme users." This group shows considerably higher

Fig. 24.1 User types participating in the ORC

Marginal activity user 12%

Heavy up-streamer 10%

Heavy down-streamer 38%
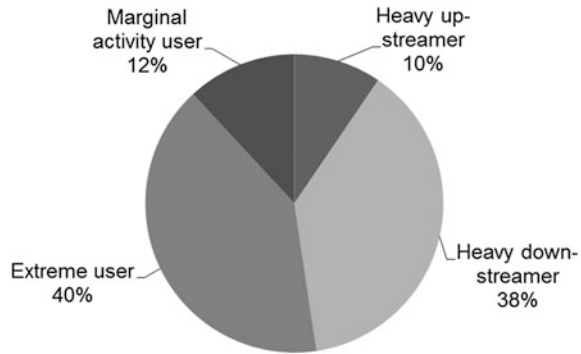
Extreme user 40%

activity levels in all previously mentioned activity dimensions. For instance, the average "Extreme user" uploaded approximately ten times as many recipes as the average user.

In the course of the online research phase of 3 weeks, 47 participants very actively contributed to the discussion with at least 15 posts in total. Due to the participants' strong identification with and passion for the brand, a nonmonetary incentive closely related to the Thermomix world was chosen to compensate them for their efforts. Each participant could choose a Thermomix cookbook which is highly coveted by Thermomix fans.

Agenda

Following a discussion guideline, which captured all relevant research topics, the Research Community moderator posted a daily task to the forum, inviting participants to share their thoughts and ideas. Typically, the task comprised one main question with several sub-questions, to ensure comprehensibility and to encourage people to elaborate on their thoughts in greater detail. Besides posting the daily task each morning, the moderator followed the ongoing discussions and intervened only in cases of misunderstandings or questions. In doing so, the moderator could adapt the structure of the discussion reacting to directions the conversation took or to aspects which emerged during the discussion. Due to the asynchronous and unobtrusive nature of this interaction, people could individually decide when to work on the tasks. At the same time, the approach fostered deliberate consumer responses on a cognitive level.

Within the first research week, the research focused on the 'status quo'. People were asked to talk about their general cooking behavior, recipe search and management and to evaluate the current Rezeptwelt. In the second week, people were introduced to the future online recipe platform ('Rezeptwelt 2.0'). Besides an overall evaluation of the design and structure, participants were invited to test and evaluate new search features and functionalities. In the third and final week, people's creative anticipation potential was addressed by showing and discussing different future features and services with the aid of visualizations and mock-ups. In addition to these smaller daily tasks, on Friday participants were given a detailed

weekend task on which they could work until Monday morning. One weekend task for example included the visit of other, competing online recipe platforms in order to compare special recipe search features. In a diary, participants were asked to capture their experiences revolving around their daily cooking and search behavior. In contrast to the general open discussions—where participants could see and comment on each other's posts—only the moderator and the individual participant had access to the personal diary.

Platform

A simple and user-friendly interface ensured easy access and guided participation over the three-week research phase. Displaying not only the overall project description but also the task of the day and an overview of all three weeks, the start page served as a hub for all activities within the ORC. Participants could directly access the task of the day prominently displayed on this page. By clicking on each research week, five different threads for each weekday appeared (see Fig. 24.2). In order to allow for simple and clear tasks, access to the daily tasks was only possible for the present (and past) research tasks, but not for future ones. Each thread was composed of background information, task description and a comment field where participants could write their answers and reactions to the task. The postings could be enriched by embedding videos, pictures or emoticons. Besides referring to the daily question, participants were encouraged to comment on others' posts or 'like' other participants' comments.

Outcome

The data produced during the research phase was impressive due to its particularly rich and insightful qualitative content, and also regarding its sheer quantity. Within


Fig. 24.2 Vorwerk online research community: start page and weekly overview

the set time frame of the three-week online phase, 1540 posts were written including 350 diary entries. Hence, consumers' contributions amount to a total number of 191,346 words which equal approximately 350 written A4 pages. Each day, at least 52 comments were posted with a peak of 91 comments on two particular days: On one of these days, the beta version of the future Vorwerk Rezeptwelt was introduced for the first time. Of course, this was an exciting day and the customers were eager to explore the new platform and share their first impression and feedback. The second peak could be observed on the final day of the online research phase, where participants were asked to express their general and future wishes for the Rezeptwelt and Thermomix, and to evaluate their overall experience within the Research Community.

Each participant posted 24 comments to the forum per day on average including one outlier with 74 posts (see Fig. 24.3 for the average division of participants' activity levels). In line with the amount of content generated during the live phase, the average participant visited the forum 36 times (total of 2232 visits for all participants), and spent 1076 min on the platform. Calculated in man days, this corresponds to 2.2 man days per participant, or 139 man days as a total for all members.

Discussions were summarized daily and qualitatively analyzed. Feedback on the future Vorwerk community was collected to eventually refine features and functions. A special feature of this co-creation project was the collaboration of the HYVE research team with the Vorwerk programmers and creators. They closely worked together during the whole research project and were able to transfer user feedback immediately into the new community platform. When the new German community website was launched after finalizing the research project, several functionalities already were adapted based on the research results and users' feedback. As an example, the rank of search fields was modified, showing the most important search features on the top of the list. Also small pieces of advice were taken seriously. For instance, the search button's color was changed from a green color to a light and signaling orange as people complained about the rather unremarkable search button.

Fig. 24.3 Participants' activity levels in the ORC
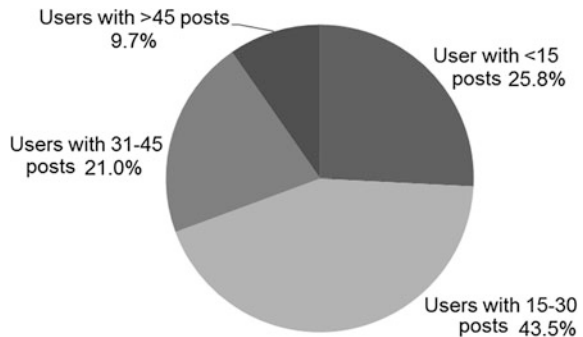
Furthermore, quantitative data from the prescreening questionnaire was linked to the comments of every participant. Through this, different user search types surfaced: One example is the 'confused user', who needs a simple structure or extra guidance and explanations. Identifying and understanding user types differing in terms of the cooking journey and search behavior in particular is a key strategic lever to drive activity on the platform and usage of the Thermomix. By offering unique experiences tailored to the individual user visiting the recipe community, the relevance of recipes can be increased and inspire consumers to use their Thermomix more often.

Although the ORC required a high level of engagement from participants over a longer period of time, almost all invitees participated actively up to the final day. Hence, they were highly involved and showed motivation to be part of the Research Community, which they also expressed in their final feedback. The research community was perceived as a great opportunity to learn and discuss not only with other people involved, but also with Vorwerk Thermomix employees. People felt honored to be part of a selected and exclusive group of people which could influence the future development of the Vorwerk community. While they were looking forward to receiving their reward—a Vorwerk cookbook—people stated that this was not the main driver for participation. Instead, they were glad to contribute to the improvement of the new community website and expressed their excitement about the launch of it as can be seen in the following original quotes.

> Thank you for choosing me and providing the opportunity to discuss and share ideas. Time flies - I really enjoyed every second of the three weeks. Discussing and exchanging – or just reading – others' members' opinions was really nice (love). Consider me ever interested in future research projects. Best wishes for success to the team and good luck with the implementation of our propositions and wishes.[1] So this is the final day – what a pity! I really enjoyed being part of this forum (any time again). I am looking forward to the new Rezeptwelt. Besides my cookbooks and recipe folders, it will remain the place where I can relax in the evening.[2] Joining this discussion forum and keeping the diary, I was intensively dealing with the recipe search. Thus, I've learned to use various unknown or not frequently used functions and tricks. It has been fun to test these things out![3]

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[1]Original quote in German: "Zum Abschluss möchte ich mich dafür bedanken, dass auch ich ausgewählt wurde und hier mitschreiben und mittüfteln durfte! Es waren recht schnelle drei Wochen, die mir wirklich sehr gut gefallen haben. Auch der Austausch mit anderen Mitgliedern bzw. das Lesen anderer Meinungen gefiel mir gut! (Love) Ich würde jederzeit gerne wieder an einer solchen Befragung teilnehmen! Nun wünsche ich dem Team viel Erfolg und Spaß bei der Umsetzung unserer nicht wenigen Vorschläge und Wünsche…".

[2]Original quote in German: "der letzte Tag -schade-, denn es hat mir viel Freude bereitet an diesem Forum teilnehmen zu dürfen.(Immer wieder gerne). Ich freue mich schon auf die neue RW. Sie wird neben meinen Kochbüchern und meinen Rezepteordnern, der Ort bleiben, in dem ich mich abends entspannen kann."

[3]Original quote in German: "Durch die Teilnahme am Diskussionsforum und dem Tagebuch habe ich mich doch intensiver mit den Inhalten der Rezeptsuche beschäftigt. Ich habe Funktionen und Tricks kennengelernt, die ich vorher noch gar nicht kannte oder nicht aktiv genutzt habe. Das Probieren hat Spass gemacht."

The example quotations also indicate how customers' passion for the Vorwerk Thermomix brand and their brand knowledge was positively influenced. Empowering consumers therefore not only helped to gain insights and create new community features but also gave a boost to the consumer-brand relationship.

24.4   Conclusion and Outlook

The Vorwerk Research Community illustrates the enormous benefits of involving customers both in innovation research and new product development processes. Online Research Communities enable the collaboration with customers over a specific time—several days, weeks or even years. Correspondingly, this intense collaboration requires the engagement of a highly affected community like brand enthusiasts. Bringing together this strongly committed group of people helps to establish in-depth dialog, in which people not only perform a particular task assigned to them, but also exchange, share and develop ideas.

Whereas the key factors of successful ORCs are its members, some additional factors should be considered to tap the methods' full potential. First, the moderation of the forum should be unobtrusive and avoid influencing, but rather provide consumers with all relevant information to conduct the tasks. Second, the website's interface and structure should be clear and uncluttered, to be intuitive and suitable environments for people with little social media knowledge. Additionally, an appealing layout encourages people to visit the forum frequently—daily, or even more often. If desired, the design of the ORC can be customized to the specific corporate design of an already existing brand community to create a consistent brand experience. This may give people the feeling of familiarity and comfort. Finally, the tasks should be diverting and fun to work on. This can be achieved, for example, through visually rich input and pictures.

In times of online social networks and organized brand communities, companies can and should tap this potential and collaborate with consumers in order to gain consumer insights and translate them into solutions for new product development. Establishing Online Research Communities as virtual places for a deep and possibly ongoing exchange and discussion between a company and consumers will help to develop user-centered products and services, establish strong relationships and retain them long-term.

Outlook

In the past two decades, the Internet has significantly transformed the market research industry in terms of efficiency. New methods have been conceived to harness the easy access to consumers and electronic communication channels via the Internet. Online panels with millions of users willing and ready to fill out questionnaires have reduced the duration of field phases and considerably accelerated feedback loops within innovation processes. Although the Internet is known to be an enabler of consumer empowerment, it has not changed the role of

consumers in market research to a larger extent. Rather, the introduction of online panels has commoditized the participation of consumers. Answers can be bought in hundreds and thousands and participating consumers are considered mere providers of data.

Online Research Communities offer a new opportunity to continuously engage with consumers for market research purposes and build meaningful relationships. Given the chance to play a more intensive role within the innovation process, consumers feel they work on an important task, are taken seriously and have an impact on the future of a company. Instead of outsourcing the access to consumers to specialists only, companies started to build and maintain relationships to consumers not only for sales reasons but also for research purposes. Here, the Internet and social media platforms, in particular, are a promising source of interested consumers. Also branded communities, such as Vorwerk Thermomix's recipe and cooking community, can be used to invite consumers to participate in innovation endeavors. These consumers are usually more involved than panel users, they know the products and services very well and often feel honored to work together with the brand. They have decided to follow the brand in social media and indicated that they would like to enter a relationship.

In many cases, companies are overwhelmed with the crowd of consumers willing to interact with them on various social media websites. Instead of looking for the really urgent questions and tasks they could tackle together with these users, they start involving them in shallow 'small talk' conversations. Although consumers often appreciate any type of interaction with a brand, a meaningful dialog has several positive effects. For one, motivated consumers or brand fans may provide valuable information and ideas which can help the company propel their innovation efforts. Secondly, maintaining the relationship with these consumers is a core task of marketing anyway, thus, including some innovation tasks can provide relevant discussion topics and spur the conversation. In order to capitalize on this effect, companies need to intertwine innovation and marketing capabilities and disciplines to holistically utilize consumer empowerment. Third, empowering consumers has also been found to have an impact on consumers' product demand (Fuchs et al. 2010). Therefore, involving consumers in meaningful tasks and inviting them to co-create value can increase sales, deepen the consumer-brand relationship and strengthen the brand's image. Fourthly, building one's own community of users may also yield cost cutting effects, especially when research communities are centrally orchestrated to serve multiple departments within a company.

Consumer empowerment strategies are an imperative for companies nowadays. By staging authentic co-creation experiences centering on meaningful task rather than superficial encounters between brands and consumers, empowerment may yield multiple positive effects for insight generation, innovation management and customer relationship management.

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