Chapter 10

The role of retailers as generators and mediators of new product ideas

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Abstract

Research on open and user innovation has not addressed the role of retailers as a source of innovation. This paper investigates the activities of retailer employees to develop own ideas for product innovations (retailer as innovator) and explores the retailers' efforts to obtain new product ideas from their customers (retailer as gatekeeper). We develop a model on potential facilitators that explain how active the retailers are with respect to both activities. Using data collected on 106 mangers of stationary sports equipment stores the analysis shows that a substantial fraction of the surveyed retailers develops new ideas, concepts, or prototype solutions for the products they sell in their stores. The findings also indicate that retailers, although they are the primary contact for end users of sport equipment, rarely receive substantial innovation-related input from their customers. Findings may help product manufacturers to select appropriate retailers for cooperation in new product development.

Keywords: user innovation, retailers, sports equipment

1 Introduction

There is little controversy in the marketing literature about the crucial role of retailers in the transfer of product innovations from producers to customers. Retail acts as gatekeeper of new products that are introduced by the brand owners. As most consumer goods markets are characterized by a continous stream of new product releases, retailers are able to exercise a significant market power. Consequently, there is extensive research investigating the antecedents that influence the decision of retailers to adopt new products and to put them into their shelves (e.g. Rao et al., 1989; White et al., 2000, van Everdingen et al., 2011). In addition, retailers also introduce innovations themselves. One main area of retailer innovations lies in the introduction of new customer interface technologies to improve the customer experience at the point of sales (e.g. Pantano and Laria, 2012). On the product level, retailers offer so called "store brands" or "private labels", i.e. brands owned, controlled, and sold exclusively by a retail company (Raju et al., 1995). Again, numerous studies have investigated the implementation of new technologies in retailing or have explored the factors that motivate retailers to introduce private labels (Corstjens and Lal, 2000; Shankar and Yadav, 2011; Liu et al., 2018). One can conclude that the transfer of product innovation from producers via retailers to consumers is well-understood.

Clearly less is known about the transfer of innovations from consumers via retailers to the producers. The influence of retailers on the generation of the manufacturers' product innovations has not been addressed in channel management literature. Most of the research examining the relationship between retailers and brand owners focuses on the day-to-day exchange

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of routine information on product inventory, sales numbers, the success of promotional activities, pricing structures and market changes (Hunt, 1995). Retail is hardly interpreted as a potential source of innovation for producers.

Also the literature on the relationships between retailers and their customers has rarely picked up the issue of innovation. The predominant discussion does not encompass the opportunity for retailers to obtain innovative ideas and concepts from their end customers. Considering the rich empirical evidence on the user innovation phenomenon, this can be interpreted as a critical research gap. Several studies have documented a high level of innovation activities performed by the users of products and services (von Hippel, 2005; Lettl, Herstatt and Gemünden, 2006; Lüthje, Herstatt and von Hippel, 2005). Consumer and household innovators have been found to frequently modify or develop new items of products for their own personal use (von Hippel, 2017). Particularly concepts developed by lead users are often rated very highly on innovativeness and use value (Herstatt and von Hippel, 1992, Lüthje and Herstatt, 2004). Since most consumer goods are sold through a channel of distribution via wholesalers, dealers, and retail shops to the consumer, store owners and their employees may play a crucial role in mediating the innovation link between consumers and producers.

In this study we focus on the activities that retailers show to stimulate the innovation work of manufacturers. We differentiate between two roles that retailers can play in this context: Firstly, retailing salespeople could act as innovators by conceiving new solutions for the products they sell (retailer as innovator). In some industries, retail salespeople are both, sellers and users of the products. Retail store employees therefore often build up an extensive experience in product use. We conclude that retail employees, due to their use experience, technical expertise and product involvement, may be well-prepared to develop solutions for modified and new products. This idea is very similar to the concept of embedded lead users, i.e. employees of producer firms who have lead user characteristics in relation to their employing firm's products (Herstatt et al., 2016).

Secondly, retailers can act as information hub by identifying innovative input of their customers and by forwarding this information to the manufacturers (retailer as gatekeeper). Taking into account that the retailers' salespeople have direct access to the product users, retailers should be able to build up a productive relationship with innovating customers visiting their stores (Beatty et al. 1996; Reynolds and Beatty 1999). Consumers should find it much easier to talk with employees working in retail than with representatives of the product manufacturers.

In this study, 106 sport shop managers were interviewed to explore the retailers' efforts to generate own innovations and to mediate new product ideas from their customers. We develop and test a model on potential retail characteristics that may explain how actively the retailers take the role of innovators and innovation gatekeepers. The descriptive findings show that a substantial fraction of the surveyed retailers report having developed new ideas, concepts or prototype solutions for the products they sell. The results also show that retailers, albeit being the primary contact for users of sports equipment, rarely receive and forward substantial innovation-related input from their customers. The test of the model shows that the proposed characteristics of the retailers give significant explanation for the respondents' own development activities and their efforts to act as gatekeepers for new product ideas of the end customers.

2 Model on retailers' innovation-related activities

In the following we propose a model on potential facilitators that may explain why some retailers act as innovators or mediators of end user innovation and others show no effort in this respect (see Figure 1).

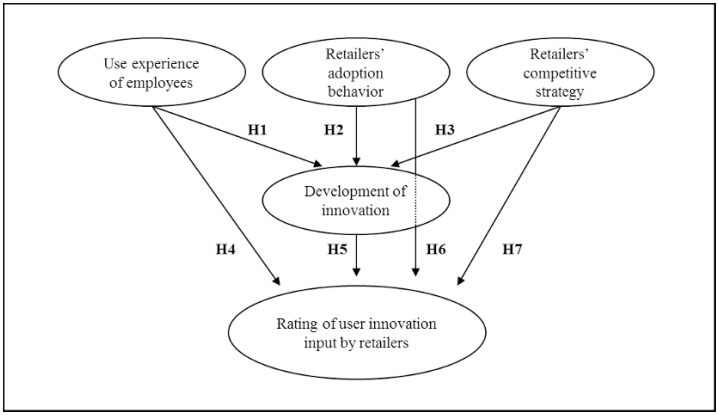

Figure 1: Model on the role of retailers as innovators and innovation mediators

2.1 Retailers as innovators

One cannot expect all retailers developing substantial ideas for innovations. We expect a high variance of innovation activities across retailers. To develop a testable model, three retailer characteristics are proposed that may facilitate original innovation efforts within the retail entities. In this first exploration of the retailers' contributions to innovation, we focus on characteristics of the dealers that are measurable and could therefore be used by producers to select attractive retailers for cooperation in new product development: use experience of employees, adoption behavior, and the generic competitive strategy of the retail stores.

Retail store salespeople with a high level of use experience (H1) may anticipate a higher benefit by innovating because they can expect to profit via personal and in-house use of their inventions (Schreier and Prügl, 2008; von Hippel et al., 2012; Stock et al., 2015). At the same time, higher levels of use experience are likely to be associated with lower costs of innovation. Retail employees with use experience are able to analyze existing use-related problems at no incremental costs. They can obtain a vivid and germane knowledge about use problems and promising solutions to those problems during activities that they engage in anyway. Retail employees having high levels of user experience have the opportunity of conceiving and testing solutions in practice and can therefore operate in a low-cost corridor of product development and refinement (Lüthje, Herstatt and von Hippel, 2002; Lüthje and Stockstrom, 2006).

Also the retailers' speed of adoption (H2) may indicate innovation-related benefit expectations (Morrison et al. 2000). Retailers that tend to integrate innovations very early in their product assortment can be expected to usually associate a high benefit with new products. Early adopters should therefore have a higher likelihood to initiate own innovation activities as well (Franke et al., 2006; Schreier and Prügl, 2008). Also, the costs for innovation may be lower for early adopting retailers. Early adopters usually have a good understanding about

new product technologies and emerging product trends. This should bring them into a better position to conceive their own new product solutions.

It is proposed that the generic strategic position of a retailer as quality leader (H3) in combination with a specialized product assortment is associated with a higher probability of own development efforts. It seems reasonable that quality leaders often strive to hire experienced staff with in-depth product knowledge in order to be able to offer a superior service to their customers (McGee and Peterson, 2000). Similarly, the distinctive marketing competencies that quality leading retailers usually need to develop should positively correlate with innovation activities. For instance, Smart and Conant, (1994) found that independent quality leading stores often reflect a strong entrepreneurial orientation in the stores' staff. In the same vein, a study in a sample of drug stores suggests that small independent quality leaders often achieve higher performance due to their superior ability to put plans into action (McGee and Peterson, 2000). Implementation capabilities might also positively correlate with autonomous innovation activities.

2.2 Retailers as mediators of end customer innovations

As already noted, studies on consumer innovations strongly indicated that users often design new product solutions (von Hippel, 2005; Lettl, Herstatt and Gemünden, 2006; Lüthje, Herstatt and von Hippel, 2005). The question arises, if retailers actually recognize this innovation potential of their customers. This study aims at investigating antecedents that possibly influence the retailers' appreciation of innovative consumer input. Again, we expect that the retailers' speed of adoption, the level of their use experience, own innovation efforts and their competitive strategy determine how retailers evaluate the user input potential.

The first three factors are assumed to influence the ability and willingness to recognize the ideas and solutions developed by users. A minimum level of use experience (H4) should help retail salespeople to develop the "absorptive capacity" in order to grasp the key advantage behind the suggestions of their customers (Cohen and Levinthal 1990). After all, the users' ideas are often rooted on tacit knowledge that can only be developed in the course of a continuous and skillful use of the products (von Hippel 1998; Lüthje, Herstatt and von Hippel, 2005). Similarly, the adoption behavior (H5) and their inclination towards own innovation efforts (H6) are indicators of high-expected innovation-related benefit. This, in turn, may foster the alertness and openness of retail staff for innovative suggestions from their customers.

The generic competitive strategy (H7) is assumed to primarily impact the actual possibility of users to communicate their ideas to a given retailer. Quality-leading, specialized stores need to be more pro-active in the management of the relationship with their customers than cost-leading mass-merchandisers (McGee and Peterson 2000; Too et al. 2000). If strategy impacts culture, it can be expected that the staff generally responds to customer needs in a manner that is congruent with the retailer's competitive strategy (Siguaw, Simpson, & Baker, 1998). Consequently, employees working in quality-leading stores should have an interaction-oriented communication style and should be more inclined to enable their customers to describe their ideas (Williams and Spiro 1985). Also the willingness of the consumers should be higher to transfer their promising ideas if a given retailer shows a stronger emphasis on customer relations and service (Beatty et al. 1996). In the same vein, users may prefer to exchange innovation ideas with innovation-active retailers having high levels of personal use experience. Use experience and own innovation activities as shown by the retailers' staff signal expertise and interest for innovative solutions (Clark, 1996).

3 Research methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

The sport equipment industry provided the setting for this study. The selection of this product field was stimulated by several studies documenting a high level of user innovation in sports equipment (Shah, 2000; Franke et al., 2003; Raasch, Herstatt and Lock, 2008). A minimum level of user innovations is a prerequisite for an active role of retailers as innovators and as mediators of innovative end user input.

The data for the main survey was collected from the target population of sports retailers in Vienna (Austria) encompassing stores in four different sport fields: outdoor (e.g. trekking, climbing, hunting), biking (street cycling, mountain biking), water-sport (e.g. sailing, surfing, scuba diving), and winter-sport (e.g. skiing, snowboarding). All the sport stores that were listed in the Yellow Pages Vienna were selected. Also retailer directories published on the web pages of sports equipment manufacturers were screened and, finally, search engines were used to complete the list of retail stores. In total, 151 sport shops were identified and contacted (full census). After one reminder, 106 store owners and managers agreed to participate in the study (70% participation rate). The data was collected through a fully-structured interview with the shop managers or store owners. The questionnaire was pre-tested with three managers of sport shops.

3.2 Measurement

To our knowledge, no standard scales exist to operationalize most of the factors included in the present model. The main survey was therefore preceded by a pilot study. We sent out questionnaires to 32 sport shop managers and owners and asked them to provide feedback to our model and scales. The purpose was both to develop new valid scales for constructs in the model and to assess the relevance of items that were extracted from various previous studies.

Table 1: Measurement of variables in the model

Construct	Formulation of items
Use experience of employees	5 point rating scale (1= not at all true; 5= very true) *Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statement:* "The employees in my store are active in sports and use the products intensively."; "It is an imperative requisite for hiring a candidate that he/she is active in sports."
Retailer's adoption behavior	5 point rating scale (1= not at all true; 5= very true) *Please specify your adoption behavior with respect to new products:* "I integrate new products immediately into my assortment."; "I rather stick to the established and reliable products than to adopt new products (reverse scale)."; "I order new products only after I get requests from my customers and after preliminary market experience exist (reverse scale)."I am usually better informed about new products than other dealers."
Retailer's generic competitive strategy	*Are you a dealer with a small assortment of products for a narrow market segment or rather a broad-line dealer for a large customer segment?* 5 point rating scale (1= large segment/large assortment; 5=narrow segment/small assortment) *Are you a quality leader (high-priced, high-quality products) or rather a price leader (low-priced products, satisfactory product quality)?* 5 point rating scale (1=price leader; 5= quality leader)
Generation of own innovation prototype	dichotomous scale (yes / no) Have you or the employees in your store ever had an idea for new or improved sports products?
Frequency of user input	(1= never; 5= very often) *How often do you get the following innovation-related input from customers in your store?*

	"Suggestions for improving existing products", "Substantial ideas for developing totally new products"
Potential of user input	(1= never; 5= very often) *Please rate the suggestions and ideas from your customers:* "Are the ideas new and innovative?"; Are the ideas sophisticated with respect to the incorporated technology?"; "Do the ideas have a high market potential if commercialized?"

Most variables were measured by multi-item scales (see Table 1). Internal consistency of the scales was ascertained by calculating Cronbach's coefficient α and conducting exploratory factor analysis. Items were deleted based on low item-to-whole correlation and low factor coefficients, if this helped to increase α or the percentage of explained variance by the factor. All constructs proved to be satisfactorily reliable. As an exception, the retailers' own innovation activities were measured by a single item. The respondents had to indicate if they or their employees have ever developed a reliable prototype or marketable solution for a new piece of sports equipment.

4 Findings

4.1 Descriptive findings

Retailers seem to play an important role as innovators of the sports equipment they sell. Over sixty percent of the 106 store managers/owners reported that they or their employees had developed one or more ideas for innovations. Of all respondents, 6.6% indicate that they had built a reliable prototype embodying their idea, and 20.8% of all respondents went even a step further by transferring their idea into a marketable product. The results are displayed in Figure 2.

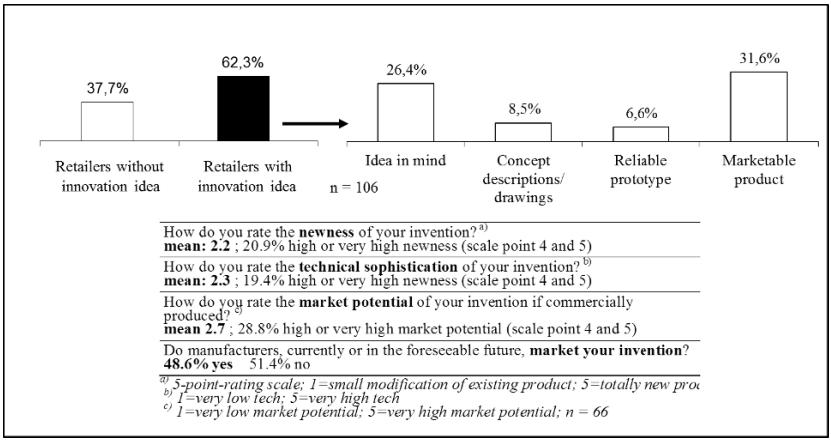

Figure 2: Descriptive findings for respondents' own innovating activities

Most ideas are relatively minor improvements of existing products and often incorporate a low-tech solution. However, quite a few store managers assign a high market potential to their inventions, with 28.8% being expected to be adopted by many customers if introduced into

the market. Similarly, a notable fraction of the innovations (48.6%) are currently or will be marketed in the foreseeable future, either by the retailer and/or by a manufacturer of sports equipment. Altogether, the findings clearly suggest that innovation efforts are disseminated through an important portion of the retailer sample.

To investigate the second role (retailers as mediators of user innovations), we asked the retail managers if they see retails as the primary communication partner for the consumers' product-related complaints and suggestions. Most of the respondents (81.1%) believe that the end users prefer to approach the retailers rather than the manufacturers. To understand the reasons for this assessment, the retail managers were asked to substantiate their assessment in an open question. Many respondents stated that consumers see the store where they usually buy their equipment as their most convenient and most logical contact. The customers often have repeated interaction experience and often built up a relationship with sales associates. In contrast, consumers find it difficult to contact the manufacturers, either because direct and personal communication channels are limited or due to spatial and cultural distance to the headquarters of a manufacturer. In sum, this finding underlines the important function that retailers, in principle, could play as mediators or gatekeepers of innovation-related customer input.

However, the results show that respondents do not perceive their customers to be an important source for innovative ideas (see Table 2). Almost two out of three respondents (62.9%) indicate that the salespeople in his/her store have never received substantial ideas for new products from their customers. As for the frequency of user input, also the potential that the respondents attribute to the ideas communicated by the customers is rather low. These findings are surprising considering the consistent empirical evidence for a high level of innovation activities among users in different sports fields (see studies cited above).

Table 2: Frequency of innovation-related input of the customers (from the retailers' perspective)

How frequently do your customers provide innovative input?					Sum (n=105)
	Never	Seldom	Occasionally	Often	Very Often
Substantial ideas for new products	62.9%	26.7%	4.8%	3.8%	1.9%

4.2 Model testing

In this section we explore if the proposed retailer characteristics can explain how active a given retailer is, both in designing own innovations and in recognizing the innovation ideas of consumers. For this, a Logit model was applied (Aldrich and Nelson 1984; Agresti and Finlay 1997). In the following analysis, the binary prototype developing activity (developing vs. not developing a reliable prototype for new equipment) serves as the dependent variable. The findings are presented in table 3. All global fit measures indicate a good fit of the estimation model. The rate of correct classified respondents in both groups (active and passive retailers) is 77.2% which is higher than the proportional chance criterion of 54.1%. Also in the smaller group of innovating retailers the percentage of correctly classified cases is satisfactory (66.7%).

Table 3: Logit model to determine influence of antecedents on prototype developing by the retailers

Independent variables	logit-coefficient	Standard error	Wald statistic
Use experience of employees[a]	0.716	0.280	6.53 **
Retailer's speed of adoption[b)]	0.994	0.286	12.09 ***
Quality leadership strategy [b)]	1.352	0.331	16.63 ***
Constant	1.024	0.306	11.12***

*n = 101; * p < 0.1; **p<0.05; *** p<0.01; Correct classified respondents = 77.2% (PCC=54.1%); LR = 47.70; df=3; p<0.001; McFaddens R^2 = 0.36*

As highlighted in Table 3, all three retailer characteristics have a clear impact on the likelihood that a given retailer starts to develop prototypes for improved or new products. With respect to use experience (H1), the result suggests that retailer employees who are at the same time users of the products in fact seem to associate a higher benefit with innovations. At the same time, they might be able to innovate at comparatively low costs, since they can base their development upon information already in their possession. Furthermore, the results support the hypothesis that retailers that accept new products from industry early in the diffusion process also tend to be innovators themselves (H2). The results finally confirm that retailers with a strategic focus on carrying fewer high-quality product-lines for small market segments are more likely to innovate (H3). Thus, the distinctive competencies that quality leaders develop to stay competitive seem to foster the ability and motivation for initiating own innovation activities.

Table 4: Results of regression analysis on perceived potential of innovation-related user input

Antecedents of perceived user input potential	OLS coefficient	t-value
Constant	0.19 (0.12)	1.48
Use experience of employee	0.18 (0.10)	1.95**
Retailer's speed of adoption	0.23 (0.10)	2.43**
Quality leadership strategy	0.09 (0.11)	0.85
Generation of own innovation prototype	0.54 (0.24)	2.218**
n =94 ; Adjusted R^2 = 0.25 ; F-value = 8.63 ***		

** p < 0.1; **p<0.05; *** p<0.01; Standard error is shown in brackets*

To test the link between the retailer characteristics and the perceived potential of the end user ideas we used straightforward linear regression analysis (OLS). The results of this computation are presented in table 4. The model is significant and explains 25% of the overall variance of the dependent variable. In alignment with our expectations, three of the four antecedents have a significant relationship with the perceived potential of the consumer suggestions. If, in a given sports shop, the employees are also users of the products (H4), if new products are usually integrated quickly into the sales program (H5), and if the employees have already developed own prototypes for innovations (H6), the store managers are more likely to appreciate the value of customer suggestions and ideas. However, the generic competitive strategy

shows no significant link with the perception of user input quality (H7). Even if quality leading stores with a specialized product offer have a stronger emphasis on customer relation and service quality, the retail type has no impact on the evaluation of the innovation potential of end customer input.

5 Discussion and implications

This study examined the role of retailers as innovators and innovation gatekeepers. The model proposes antecedents that influence the likelihood that a given retailer develops new solution for the sports products it sells (retailers as innovators) and suggests factors influencing how retailers evaluate the value of consumers as an important source of innovation (retailers as mediators of user innovations).

With respect to the first role, the results show that a significant share of the sports equipment retailers in the sample develop own ideas, concepts and prototypes for new products. Most of these ideas do not represent major innovations but rather constitute product improvements and low-tech solutions. Manufacturers that decide to use the creative potential of retailers in new product development should therefore not expect to find much breakthrough innovation. However, despite their low-tech character, a notable fraction of the ideas found in this sample are judged to be of high potential value for the end users if produced commercially. Producers are therefore well-advised to enrich their relationship with retailers and to expand the interaction and communication with retail employees to the field of innovation. As such, it is suggested that future research on channel management should consider this important objective of the producer-retailer dyad.

The test of our model shows that the three proposed retail characteristics give significant explanation for own development activities of the retailers in the sample. If manufactures strive to involve their distributors and retailers in new product development projects, they can use the results to carefully select appropriate retailers as cooperation partners. The results presented in this study strongly suggests that this selection can be based on characteristics that distinguish between innovation-active and innovation-passive retailers: information on the use experience of the employees, on the speed of adoption with respect to new products, on the competitive strategy of the retailer, and finally, on the retailers' innovation activities should enable manufactures to efficiently search for retail staff with high innovation potential. This procedure differs from the standard procedure of producers to primarily interact with their largest and most profitable retailers.

Regarding the second role, i.e. the activities of retailers as mediators of user-initiated ideas, we find a rather low appreciation of consumers as a source of innovation. This finding is surprising in light of the consistent empirical evidence for a high level of innovation activities among users in different sports fields. Perhaps a significant part of the user inventions never finds its way to retail employees because the users explicitly refuse or simply lack the motivation to contact the retailers. In addition, one cannot rule out the possibility that user suggestions, although they are communicated to retail employees, are still not registered or underestimated with respect to their potential. However, it is a limitation of this study that we cannot assess if the retailers' perception is a valid reflection of the "true" consumers' creative poten-

tial. Future research should seek to simultaneously collect data from retailers and their customers to better control for perceptual biases and, by this, to arrive at valid estimations about how appropriately retailers play the role of innovation gatekeepers.

The model test with respect to the experienced quality and potential of the users' creative input also provides clear results. The competitive strategy (specialized, quality leader versus broad-line price leader) is the only factor that does not show a significant relationship with the perceived potential of consumer input. In alignment with our expectations, however, high levels of use experience, own innovation activities and the tendency to be early in adopting new products are significantly associated with the perceived potential of the user innovation input to retailers.

Overall, this study indicates that large price-leading chains and other mass-merchandisers will be less valuable sources of innovation for producers, both because they receive less creative input from their customers and because they do not forward innovation the user ideas to the product firms. If manufacturers want to avoid losing external innovation input, they can try to prompt large retailers to intensify their activities as innovation gatekeepers and to act as innovation agents of the suppliers. An indirect measure taken by the manufacturers could be centered on active signaling that they are open for innovation-related cooperation and that this cooperation is likely to pay for the participating retailers. This approach can be supported by direct measures, such as formal reward systems to motivate retail managers to act in the manufactures' best interest. In addition, manufacturers can support training activities directed to enhance the alertness, openness and absorptive capacity of retail employees regarding new product ideas and concepts of their customers.

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