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An exploration of consumer resistance to innovation and its antecedents

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ABSTRACT

Although firms are faced by a large number of market introduction failures, research into a major driver of these failures, customer resistance to innovation, is surprisingly scarce. While most authors have investigated positive adoption decisions, this paper focuses instead on consumer resistance to innovation. The current study presents a conceptual framework which explicates the major components of consumer resistance: (1) rejection, (2) postponement, and (3) opposition, and discusses two main groups of antecedents to consumer resistance: (1) degree of change required and (2) conflicts with the consumer's prior belief structure. This framework is explored with both a literature review and a qualitative focus group study. These joint efforts result in the formulation of a model of consumer resistance. Finally, the authors discuss several relevant theoretical and strategic implications, and point out directions for future research.

1. Introduction

Despite company efforts to adopt consumer-oriented innovation development processes focused on delivering added value to the consumer (Danneels, 2003), most commercial companies are faced with high rates of innovation failures (Moore, 2002). This is puzzling, as innovation adoption research has stressed that relative advantage is a dominant driver of consumer adoption. Nevertheless, many innovations still meet resistance (Garcia & Atkin, 2002; Molesworth & Suortti, 2002). The reasons for this resistance vary and have not as yet received a significant amount of study, but examples illustrate the diversity of innovations which meet resistance. For example, consumers expressed moral objections against genetically modified food, and actively campaigned against the introduction of these innovations (Bredahl, 2001; Fortin & Renton, 2003).

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Consumer resistance also appears in the case of simpler innovations. For example, many wine drinkers steadfastly refused to accept the screw cap as an acceptable replacement for the traditional cork on wine bottles (Garcia & Atkin, 2002).

While numerous studies explore factors that contribute to the "positive" decision to adopt such innovations (e.g., Lennon et al., 2007; Lin, Hsin-Yu, & Sher, 2007), understanding why customers resist adoption is at least as important (Midgley & Dowling, 1993; Szmigin & Foxall, 1998). While fundamental innovation research (Rogers, 2003) has always at least tacitly recognized this importance, empirical research in this field has been less active in investigating the nature and drivers of resistance compared to adoption. In particular, it is rarely the case that studies explicitly differentiate adoption from resistance; instead implicitly considering resistance as simply non-adoption (Nabih, Bloem, & Poiesz, 1997). However, it is not appropriate to conclude that consumer resistance is simply the obverse of adoption (Gatignon & Robertson, 1989; Herbig & Day, 1992; Ram & Sheth, 1989).

The objective of this paper is to develop insight into this relatively underdeveloped area in the innovation literature. The nature of the contribution provided is thus twofold. First, a detailed theoretical conceptualization of consumer resistance is developed. Ram and Sheth (1989) have provided an initial investigation of this concept, where they recognize that consumer resistance reveals itself in different forms of behavior, being rejection, postponement, and opposition, which appear similar to the ideas put forward by Coetsee (1999). Nevertheless, as suggested by Nabih et al. (1997), these concepts tend to lack standardized conceptual and operational definitions, and resistance itself appears to have been confused with the simple, and more passive, notion of 'non-adoption' (Peñaloza & Price, 1993). Following from this, with few noteworthy exceptions (e.g., Ram & Sheth, 1989), little research has been done on the antecedents which may create consumer resistance to innovations (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005). This article reports the results of a combined theory-driven and theory-generating study conducted according to the aforementioned objectives. First, an integrative overview of relevant literature is presented. Additionally, the methods and results of a qualitative focus-group study are discussed. Finally, limitations and directions for future research are detailed.

2. Literature review

While several authors have supported the notion of consumer resistance (Gatignon & Robertson, 1989; Ram, 1987; Sheth, 1981) and implicitly or explicitly acknowledged the importance of 'negative' or 'anti' consumption (e.g., Bredahl, 2001; Garrett, 1987; Herrmann, 1993; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998; Saba, Rosati, & Vassallo, 2000), there is little attention devoted to the thorough conceptualization of the concept of individual consumer resistance (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005; Peñaloza & Price, 1993). Moreover, that research which does exist is predominantly theoretical with little effort devoted to the empirical explication and validation of consumer resistance. Therefore, a more in-depth discussion of the concept of consumer resistance is needed.

Innovation resistance is a response based on a conscious choice (Szmigin & Foxall, 1998), defined by Ram and Seth (1989, p. 6) as *"the resistance offered by consumers to an innovation, either because it poses potential changes from a satisfactory status quo or because it conflicts with their belief structure."* Nevertheless, this broad definition of innovation resistance is not particularly illuminating, being as it essentially defines innovation resistance as 'resistance to innovation'. One key issue of concern is that resistance includes not trying the innovation (Nabih et al., 1997; Ram & Sheth, 1989; Szmigin & Foxall, 1998). This is problematic because Rogers (2003) points out that initial objections toward an innovation can sometimes be overcome by offering consumers the opportunity to try the innovation for a certain period of time. Moreover, existing literature (e.g., Ram & Sheth, 1989; Szmigin & Foxall, 1998) suggests that innovation resistance can be further delineated from the basic 'not-trying' of the innovation into three distinct types of consumer behavior: rejection, postponement, and opposition.

Rejection: Rejection is not driven by a simple lack of awareness or ignorance about the innovation on the consumer's part. Rather, this form of resistance implies an active evaluation on the part of the consumer, which results in a strong disinclination to adopt the innovation (Rogers, 2003). Lee and Clark (1996–1997) recognize that this reluctance is often induced by a suspicion of new and unproven innovations. In addition, Hirschheim and Newman (1988) contend that rejection is intertwined with an innate conservatism, i.e., a reluctance to change the status quo. An example of a food innovation that was rejected by the American market is McDonalds' 'Arch Deluxe' burger, which had the slogan the "Burger with the Grown-up Taste". While McDonalds positioned this new burger as a more sophisticated food product for adults, consumers did not really consider McDonalds as a provider of sophistication, but of convenience (Haig, 2003).

Postponement: Although consumers find an innovation acceptable in principle, they may decide not to adopt it at that point in time, for example until the circumstances are more suitable. In this case the decision is not final, and thus this definition is similar to Greenleaf and Lehmann's (1995) "delay", as a form of consumer resistance. For example, many consumers are waiting for voice over internet protocol (VoIP) technology to become more mainstream before considering adopting this technology. Currently, software and hardware for VoIP is readily available (e.g., Skype) and is in fact very easy to use. However, it is not regarded as a standard yet, and most consumers are still suspicious of what they regard as "unproven technology" (D'Errico, 2005).

Opposition: Consumers may be convinced that the innovation is unsuitable and decide to launch an attack – for example negative word-of-mouth – against its launch. Davidson and Walley (1985) describe this as innovation sabotage, where consumers actively engage in strategies to prevent the innovation's success. Such forms of opposition, also referred to as "active rebellion", are most likely to affect market mechanisms (Fournier, 1998). There are ample examples of consumer innovations