



Tourism: innovating with the users

The case of the Serre Chevalier ski resort

Innovating with the users' input has long existed in the tangible goods industry. Procter & Gamble receives ideas for new products suggested by their clients or other companies through their Internet site *Connect and Develop*. For the last four years Orange has been using the site *DreamOrange* to test concepts for new telecommunication services. More recently, the SNCF (Société Nationale des Chemin de Fer Français) has been receiving new ideas for traveller services via the forum *ImagineTGV*. In tourism there is only an embryonic form of this practice in the shape of satisfaction surveys, but in reality this information is rarely analysed and does not often generate any ideas for new services. Is it possible to adapt these methods of innovation with users to the tourist industry?

Innovation for tourists

Innovation in the tourist sector focuses more on creating new services than on developing new technologies. It is generally based on the motivation and knowledge of the employees providing the service. In this sector, enterprises rarely ask their clients when seeking new ideas for services, while the clients could, under certain circumstances, become real innovators and provide decisive information for conceptualizing successful innovations.

When a client is travelling they live a real consumer experience and, at the same time, they acquire a lot of knowledge about how it is done. When the offer is insufficient to satisfy their needs, some clients, known as *lead users*, use this knowledge to innovate

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in how they consume leisure activities and travel. These *lead users*, who are consumer trend forerunners, feel the needs that will later be felt by others. A *lead user* is therefore of great interest to an enterprise that wishes to innovate. By involving them in their innovation process, the new service will be more adapted to the clients' needs and will have a greater chance of success when it is launched. In order to take into account the specificities of touristic innovation, the *lead user* can be included in the generation of ideas in focus groups to test the innovative concepts put forward by the employees. This approach allows the professional knowledge of

the tourist enterprise to be mixed with the user knowledge of those who will be taking advantage of the future services. Furthermore, using the focus group method avoids disrupting service delivery by involving the user outside the context of the service. These focus groups may take place on the Internet to limit costs and to recruit the most active Internet surfers in the forums and social media.

The focus group on-line: the case of the Serre Chevalier ski resort

The focus group on-line is in fact an on-line asynchronous discussion forum that brings together some 15 participants for a period of three to 15 days for asynchronous exchanges under the guidance of a study leader. This method has been used to test innovative concepts thought up by the residents and employees of the French ski resort Serre Chevalier with the support of the innovation consultancy firm, "La belle idée".

At the beginning, three groups of skiers were targeted according to the intensity with which they skied. Advertisements were published on the most animated specialized web sites¹ to recruit motivated and active participants who could have the profile of *lead user*. A panel including users of *Second Life* was added as well to recruit people who were interested in new technology. A gift voucher for 50 or a weekend ski package was offered to the skiers to thank them for their participation. The registration page described the programme in detail and asked some questions to determine the skiers' profiles. Out of the 1,000 people who visited the registration page, 210 registered to take part in the focus groups. Following registration, three groups of 15 people each were put together. The first group was made up of skiers who visited ski resorts from six to over ten times a year, all with children, and over half of whom lived outside the Rhone-Alps region. The second group combined skiers and snowboarders who went to ski resorts rather less than six times a year, with or without children, who liked technology, and who lived all over France. The third group assembled skiers who skied intensively, visiting ski resorts more than ten times a year and who, for the most part, lived in the Rhone-Alps region. The panel participants received an e-mail to confirm that they had been accepted one week before the focus groups began. To confirm their registration, participants had to send back an e-mail with their postal address and consent to a confidentiality agreement. They then received a confirmation e-mail giving them the forum's address, the access codes and the date on which the focus group would begin.

¹ Skitour.com, Skieur.com, SnowSurf.fr, le forum du CAF de Paris, une news sur Toutleski.com.

In all three groups, the study leader presented four to five innovative concepts to the participants in the form of illustrations accompanied by a description of several lines. These illustrations showed scenes with *Playmobils* to encourage imagination and test the global perception of innovative concepts. The idea was to avoid letting the participants focus on the details. The idea was more to give rise to answers on questions of use and acceptability of the innovation rather than on the nature of the equipment. The study leader asked three to four questions per concept and the participants answered the questions directly or reacted to the others' answers. On the first day, for each concept introduced there was a general presentation with questions on the innovation's acceptability, followed by more in-depth explanations with questions on planning during the second day, and a follow-up on the third day based on a summary of the discussions that had taken place. This summary was accompanied by additional questions to go into further detail on those points that had given rise to the most discussion.

Some precautions to take

On the subject of the method, this experiment brought to light several elements that should be taken into account to successfully conduct a focus group on-line.

First of all, recruitment is the most delicate phase for the focus group. Social media and specialised sites provide a very good panel of potential participants. However the focus group approach, situated on the dividing line between marketing and conception, sometimes upsets forum administrators. An authorisation to show advertisements was systematically requested from these administrators. One of the most active specialised ski sites refused however as they considered that it was purely a marketing operation and had nothing to do with conception. Study managers must therefore be very clear about their objectives and not mix marketing communication operations with new service conception. Furthermore, on the Internet, proofs of trustworthiness must be given to those who participate. The discussions on the skitour forum following the recruitment announcement showed the importance of being clearly identified on the Internet. People questioned the truth and honesty of the proposal. The explanation page for the focus group was located on the study leader's blog, so it was easy for people to find out where the advertisement came from. The firm

undertaking the study must therefore already be present on the Internet before setting up an on-line focus group in order to reassure possible participants.

A week should also be left between the end of the recruitment phase and the beginning of the focus group. Following the confirmation e-mail requesting the postal address and the acceptance of the confidentiality agreement, more than 30% of those selected, renounced their participation. The groups had to be reclassified and e-mails sent to the other participants. It is therefore necessary to launch the recruitment process several times until the desired number of participants is obtained. Finally, out of 47 people recruited, seven did not participate at all.

As regards time management, a large amount of time must be foreseen for setting-up and writing the intermediary summaries. The study leader must constantly adapt the pre-written questions to the participants' reactions, which means following and analysing the forum in real time in order to be very reactive.

Conclusion

This method gave us the opportunity to collect 337 contributions in two weeks. A dozen ideas were identified as being of interest. The ski resort managers for Serre Chevalier were surprised at the number and quality of the participants' reactions. They began with the pre-conceived notion that internal innovative concepts would be of great interest to their clients. However, the analysis of the discussions brought out the fact that ski resort innovations were neither accepted nor appreciated except under certain conditions: preservation of the environment, respect for mountain authenticity, affordable pricing and making life easier in the resort. Also, this method is especially well-adapted to involving users of touristic innovation. The influx of services in tourism provokes reactions on the spur of the moment that are difficult to analyse. Inviting skier on the Internet, in "another place", to give their reactions to future service concepts, provides the opportunity to not only test the interest they have for these new ideas, but also to obtain more global information in order to better understand their long-term expectations. This method connects the service provider with the users of their service right from the start of the service concept and means that a long-term relationship may be begun with them to ensure the concept's chances of success.

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