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by James Cherkoff & Johnnie Moore

Co-Creation Rules!

Co-creation is a return to very human values that intuitively seem right.

Not in Kansas

We no longer live in a world where people instinctively trust authority. As much social research shows, we'd rather trust our own instincts and the information we learn from our friends. For organisations and brands, this ain't Kansas anymore. In our social world, it's better to be talked about by others than to try to out-shout the crowd.

If we have to choose between engagement and control, we prefer engagement. We think that organisations in the future will do well to have the same preference when it comes to dealing with their own people and their customers.

Customer experience is not something to be controlled. It's a mixture of the organisation's thinking and the customers'. This can all sound quite chaotic and scary but it shouldn't. In many ways Co-Creation is a return to very human values that intuitively seem right.

This manifesto is a starter-for-ten. It's taken from our experiences working with companies managing co-creative projects of various different sizes and shapes. Some are just dipping a toe in the shallow end but some have committed to company-wide programmes.

We're not going to argue about whether these rules are true. But we have found them useful and maybe you will too. But first...



A Drawing Game

A fast-moving, networked economy doesn't reward too much theorising. We think co-creation is an energetic process, not an intellectual exercise.

So we invite you to try one of the simple improv activities that we use in our workshops to explore co-creation.

Co-creation is an energetic process, not an intellectual exercise.



Here are the instructions for a simple activity to be done with one other person. We encourage you to try this out as a way of exploring co-creation as a live experience, not just something you read about in a manifesto.

The exercise is simple: you and your partner are going to draw a face, together. It won't be a familiar face (probably) but one you're making up between you. Once you're ready, you work silently. Resist the urge to discuss the picture as it develops and don't comment on each other's ideas. (You probably won't be able to suppress laughter, though.)

Draw just one feature of the face. It's up to you what it is: it could be an ear, an eye, a nose, a tattoo, an eyebrow... whatever. Rule of thumb: when you lift the pen off the paper, you've finished your turn. And remember, as you're working silently, don't explain what you've drawn.



Then your partner takes the pen and draws a feature. It may be another ear or eye, or it could be something else. Whatever it is, you then get the pen and carry on. Even if you're not sure what has been drawn. And if you don't know—don't ask! Just carry on adding features as best you can.

Keep going like this for a few turns, each adding a single feature with each turn. When someone gets the pen and hesitates about what to do, this means the face is finished. So that person now puts down the first letter of the name of this character. Keep adding letters until someone hesitates—and then you've finished.

And again, don't comment on what your partner writes, whatever you may think! It's a good idea to do this at least three times. It's interesting to see how the experience changes with each repetition.

We suggest you now take a few moments to reflect with your partner on what it was like to do this together.

- What was it like to create something mutually? Do you sense that what you drew is different from the picture either of you might have created alone?
- Did you find that what your partner did sometimes surprised you? Was some existing plan of your own for “how things should be” disrupted? Did you sometimes find the process amusing and enjoyable? If so, what was enjoyable about it?
- What did you learn about working together from doing this?

We usually find that people engage with the exercise with ease and often enthusiasm. Sometimes participants think this activity is pointless—and yet find it hard to explain their enthusiasm for taking part. People often take part in these games with more commitment than they do in regular business meetings—meetings that, in theory, are about much more important topics.

What you've done here, with your partner, is to co-create something together that neither of you controlled, though you both influenced it. You contributed your own ideas and built on the other person's. So even if they drew something weird, or something you didn't like, you found a way to say: *Yes, And . . .* to them. You didn't (we hope) cross their stuff out, you let yourself be affected by their contribution. And if it was odd, well, you let yourself be surprised. Pleasantly, we hope.

What this activity does is focus on a world that is co-created. And shows that creating such a world can be engaging, surprising and satisfying.

By the way, GE ran a drawing game online called Imagination Cubed. This allowed pairs of people in disparate parts of the world to create drawings online, together. In three months, they generated over 3 million drawings from more than 200 countries! That's a huge amount of attention for GE for a pretty modest expenditure in technology. It's a small example of what happens when a brand is willing to get the audience playing together.

Co-Creation Rules

Here are our co-creation rules of thumb, inspired by our shared experiences of life, improvisation and working with clients who are embracing what we call “open source marketing”.

1. YES, AND

“Be willing to acknowledge and value what I have to say”

Probably the simplest and most useful rule of all. See if you can say yes to your fellow collaborators, or at least find the things you can say yes to in what they offer you. And then build on what you liked. It’s what our drawing game is all about, no crossing out of the other person.

When someone found that Coke and Mentos, when mixed, turned into a harmless yet explosive cocktail, it was no surprise that millions of others played into the meme. But while Mentos joined in, Coke tried to strategise and direct proceedings. As a result the soft drinks giant seemed out of touch. Mentos understood how to really say “Yes, And” to their customers... Coke offered more of a “No, But.”

2. MAKE AN OFFER

“Don’t show me an ad and ask me to admire it, make me an offer and ask me to do something.”

In traditional marketing the aim has been to create a finished piece of work that people will enjoy or find useful in some way. In the modern marketplace it’s more effective to invite people to participate. In practice that means making an offer that is sufficiently enticing for the customer to want to become involved. With modern marketing, you let the customers do more of the talking.

Sometimes, your offer might be fairly small, like GE’s offer to make a drawing with a friend. It might be medium-sized, like Converse which created a space for its fans to make their own video ads for the brand. Sometimes the offer will be pretty big, like the one Linus Torvald made to the crowd of developers responsible for the extraordinary success of Linux.

Let customers do more of the talking.

3. SET THE SCENE

“Let me know what you want me to do. And how. And why.”

People will react positively to a strong offer but if participation is to be of value they need to be clear about what they are doing. People will quickly lose interest when presented with a blank sheet of paper. In the words of open source guru Eric Raymond, “When you start community-building what you need to be able to present is a plausible promise.” When the producers of the Showtime drama, The L-Word, invited the audience to collaborate with them on the creation of some fanisodes, they were very specific about the area that they wanted to collaborate within, specifying the characters and the type of scene and then handing over to the audience. The result was 1258 submissions around which a vibrant community was born and a new fanisode that attracted 50 per cent higher ratings than the ‘pro’ shows.

4. MAKE YOUR CUSTOMERS LOOK GOOD

“The best way to get my attention is by giving me a platform.”

In traditional marketing the emphasis was always on making the brand or the company the star. Today, it's all about making the customer look good. That could be through the provision of a clever service or the creation of a platform where people can be heard. Bazooka Bubble Gum's recent campaign composed of some catchy rap lyrics, a few dance moves and some demos, which people were then asked to try for themselves. People were happy to pick up the lead and riff their own versions with family and friends which were then shared and enjoyed via YouTube.

5. CREATE OPPORTUNITY

“What thing—however small—can you do to improve my life?”

Corporations and big brands can bring a lot to the party. The modern marketer knows that the best way to encourage participation is by offering people opportunities to improve their lives—in ways that they enjoy, not prescribed by the brand. Red Bull has had great success with just this approach in their Art of the Can Campaign, where aspiring artists are given a platform to create a piece of art from the Red Bull can. The campaign has run for several years in many different countries. Recently, one entry, 250ml Rhythm, in the shape of a video on YouTube was viewed more than 500,000 times and was then itself remixed by others.

6. PLAY

“If it seems easy and fun, I’ll ask someone else to play.”

Having fun, sharing laughter, is a mark of a team of people that are sharing an experience. Fun is one of the strongest forms of social glue and if you’re not having fun, it’s going to be hard to consistently create fun experiences for others.

Adidas has shown a great sense of fun with its Adicolour range, a pair of white trainers that came complete with a paint palette, so that people could decorate them and create something special. The whole project was socialised online in the shape of a competition to find the best custom-job according to 60,000 public votes. Adidas took the winning entry and made 50 pairs—half of which were presented to the winner and half of which went on sale in NYC. The spirit of the product continued into the campaign featuring outdoor poster sites upon which people were invited to add their own graffiti.

People like to congregate around objects, play with them and create their own meaning.

One idea we find ourselves returning to was introduced to us by Jyri Engeström at Reboot 7.0—Object Centered Sociality. It’s the idea that these days people like to congregate around objects, play with them and create their own meaning, alone or with others.

Marketing 1.0 treats customers as objects of communication: marketing is done to them. In co-creation, everyone is a subject—an initiator of action, a creator—and your brand, and your promotions, are the objects everyone gets to play with.

7. UNDERSTAND THE ENVIRONMENT

“Errr, did you really think that would impress anyone here?”

In an environment where users are creating the content, setting the tone, and determining what is good and bad, it's vital to understand the environment. Any organisation that misreads the cultural tone of an online space is going to look stupid. In the UK, a cleaning product called Cillit Bang created a blog intended to bring alive a character, Barry Scott, from its advertising campaign. However, when someone from the PR agency, posing as the fictional Barry, left a message on a personal post written by a prominent UK blogger, trouble brewed. The blogger was writing about a tense relationship with his father and found it offensive to be getting spammed by a fictional character. A PR storm was started that ended up in the UK national press then in *Business Week*. Whoops! Today a search for the product's name still returns unwelcome memories of that painful episode.

8. WORK AT IT

“If I’m going to be involved—you need to be involved.”

It’s important for brands to realise that participation is hard work, maybe harder work than traditional marketing. Brands that think they can just set up the forum and let their customers do all the work are going to be disappointed. Co-creation is not about someone else doing the job for you, it’s about working in a different way to get better, more fulfilling results.

The hard core of customers will be way more enthusiastic than you are.

9. LOVE THE 1%ERS

“If you think I am a little bit too interested in your product, then maybe you should try listening more carefully.”

As our friend Stefan Engeseth asks (in his new book, *One*): when did you last see a CEO with a company tattoo on his arm? For the liveliest brands, the hard core of customers—the 1%ers—will be way more enthusiastic than you are.

In 1969, the bikers that are so closely associated with Harley Davidson were quite reviled by the company’s management. So much so that they were referred to as the one-percenters—as in the one percent who spoil it for everyone else. HD’s mindset was that its executives were best placed to decide what customers wanted. They were shocked when tattooed-hooligans started taking their beloved bikes apart, or chopping them, to meet their own warped ‘hog’ desires. The release of the sub-cultural film, *Easy Rider*, only made matters worse. It was only when the company’s worth hit rock-bottom and a younger member of the HD clan took control of the business that that view changed. The company embraced the one percenters and reframed their destructive tendencies as a guide to what their most hardcore and loyal customers wanted. As a result, the company’s fortunes were reversed and its value soared. Today’s HOG club is a million members strong and organises itself into chapters—just like the one percenters in ‘69.

10. GET VERNACULAR

“It doesn’t matter what you say if I don’t like the way you are saying it.”

Tone is vital. In traditional media you can say what you want in the knowledge that people can’t answer back. However, in networked markets, people will make ongoing judgements about the way you act. If they don’t like it, they’ll go elsewhere. LonelyGirl15, the massive YouTube meme created by a couple of young filmmakers, works so well because it is indistinguishable from its surroundings. In contrast, when the UK government tried to get involved in the video community, its formal tone looked awkward and out of place. Silence ensued. Perhaps this is why some companies are thinking of giving up press releases, with all their arcane language, in favour of blogging their news.

Doc Searls talks about the value of the vernacular in architecture and software development. Vernacular in the sense of widespread, ordinary and beneath notice. In marketing, don’t let the fancy tone of your communication get in the way of its purpose.

11. MAKE MISTAKES

“Let me decide what’s perfect.”

What’s happening is new. You are going to make mistakes. Get over it. You’ll be forgiven if you admit them, change and move on. If you want to create real relationships with customers, you need to show some vulnerability. Demanding proof that everything will work faultlessly in networked media environments will kill innovation.

12. LOWER BARRIERS

“If this relationship is going to last, it probably needs to be low maintenance.”

Co-creation is not about technology, it's about people participating in what you do and how you market it. And that means making it as easy as is humanly possible for people to use and incorporate into their lives. Focus on simple—people can add complex later on.

Instead of taking the typical path to launch a new product Smirnoff created a fun music video, Tea Partay, for its new Tea beverage, exclusively on YouTube. No other mention of the Tea could be found in Smirnoff's marketing or PR. In less than a month over a million people had viewed and shared the video garnering tremendous momentum for the Tea with buzz appearing in traditional media.

It would have been tempting for most brands to create their own site in an effort to get more attention. By opting for YouTube, a site already very familiar to their market, Smirnoff created almost no barrier to engagement.

13. LET THE MESS SHOW

“Show me more and I’ll trust you more.”

Some people—especially those 1%-ers are as interested in the process as they are the product Don’t assume your customers won’t be curious about the day-to-day.

Online fashion publishers SHOWstudio, set up by uber-photographer Nick Knight, set out with the belief that what was going on behind the camera was just as exciting as what was going on in front of it. The site is now one of the leading online stops for fashionistas around the world keen to get a behind the scenes peek, download original John Galliano designs, and share their views and ideas about how what they see inspires them.

It’s harder and harder to run your business as a black box.

14. SHARE YOUR SECRETS

“Tell me something I don’t know and make me feel special.”

When there’s a website called internalmemos.com, which publishes leaked internal correspondence from a wide range of corporates, we start to wonder: Can there ever be such a thing as an internal memo? Smart customers, and the proliferation of online networking, mean that it’s harder and harder to run your business as a black box. From professional service firms to sandwich companies, organisations are giving up on making money from keeping their secrets... to making it from sharing their knowledge and creating new, better, more valuable knowledge with their customers.

For instance, the law firm Lovells went to their client Prudential Property Services and told them they were doing a lot of routine work for them that they could get done much more cheaply elsewhere. Then they co-created a programme to assess each brief and separate routine tasks from complex ones. Lovells would then contract-out the routine work to smaller, regional firms and focus their efforts on the curved balls. They saved the Pru a lot of money...and created so much trust that they were given a bigger portfolio to work on. Then they took their application and won over new clients with the same idea.

Sandwich chain Pret a Manger publishes the recipes for all their food, so you can make it for yourself, if you want. MIT has put its entire course curriculum freely online. A pilot at Southwest Airlines is compiling a list of crew recommendations on where to eat at US airports to share with customers.

All these organisations realise you actually create more value when you share openly. Black boxes just create suspicion and frustration.

15. BE CHANGED

“Show me you’ve listened”

When you set up co-creative relationships the most exciting thing that happens is not that your product or service gets more famous. The most exciting thing is that you are changed by the experience.

In the world of improvised theatre, which inspires a lot of our thinking, the player who tries too hard to drive the narrative is accused of scriptwriting. The one who tries to tell jokes is encouraged to stop gagging. The real skill in performance is to fully take on the offers of the other players and be changed by them. Then what you offer back is likely to develop the drama.

In France, L’Oreal’s first stab at blogging involved a fake character talking about the product. A strong backlash from bloggers led the company to a change of direction that worked much better. L’Oreal followed rule 11 and learnt something. Then they let themselves be changed. That’s co-creation at work

And many people argue that the biggest change that arises from developing co-creation takes place inside the organisation.

16. SHOW THE HUMANITY

“This time, it’s personal.”

The web is powered by individuals tinkering, not corporations bellowing, so a passionate voice, or voices, from within a company can strike the perfect tone and be heard far and wide.

For many years Birds Eye has been trying to impress upon people that their frozen food is now wholesome and fresh—not the leftovers that it once was. While they continue to use above-the-line advertising, the company also arranged for Colin Wright, the company’s Agricultural Manager, to record the pea harvest that he managed from farms around the UK, using blogs and other lo-fi networked media. The result is a first-hand account of the care and expertise involved in taking the peas from field to packet, complete with grainy photos of misty 4am starts and blurred images of the company’s MD knee-deep in the fields. The result was miles away from slick TV slots but you couldn’t help but sense the passion of real people doing real jobs.

17. THERE ARE NO RULES

“Let’s just see where we go...”

Of course there are no rules. As Captain Barbossa says in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, “the Code is more what you’d call ‘guidelines’ than actual rules.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

James Cherkoff spent the first eight years of his career in PR at global marketing consultancy Burson–Marsteller. There he managed programmes for Unilever and Accenture, which he then joined. In '98 James moved online as Client Services Director at the web design agency Bluewave before founding and managing Pumpernickle, a consultancy focused on Internet Culture. In 2003 James brought together his PR and online experience at Collaborate Marketing. Today, the consultancy helps companies in Europe and the US understand and operate in networked media environments. James is editor of the blog [Modern Marketing](#). He also contributes articles to the FT, BBC, Independent, *Guardian* and *Ad Age*. James speaks at conferences and events around Europe and the US, including MIT MediaLab and Reboot. He is also founder and presenter of Open Sauce Live—commercial seminars for 21st century marketers.

James lives in Hackney, London with his partner and daughter. When he isn't knee deep in blog-world he is likely to be found watching and discussing Arsenal FC, cooking spicy food, drinking Rioja, running around Hackney Marshes, reading horrific crime novels or playing peek-a-boo.

Johnnie Moore started his career as a researcher and speechwriter to Lord Sainsbury before going into advertising. He started his own marketing consultancy in 1988. In recent years, he has focussed more on the human side of organisations and trained as a facilitator and frequently used methods like Open Space to support unconferences. He thinks marketing in future will be more like facilitation. He keeps his own blog, johnniemoore.com/blog as well as running Open Sauce Live workshops with James, and speaks at conferences and events around Europe too. Johnnie's recent clients have included National Public Radio, the BBC, Channel 4 and Johnson and Johnson. He is also a level 60 Human Mage in World of Warcraft.

homepage URL: www.opensaucelive.com

Email address: james@collaboratemarketing.com

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