

## LECTURE 6

### INNOVATIONS AND COMMUNITY (CONT'D)

#### c) Understanding the needs of different user segments

Diffusion researchers believe that a population can be broken down into five different segments, based on their propensity to adopt a specific innovation: innovators, early adopters, early majorities, late majorities and laggards.

Each group has its own —personality, at least as far as its attitude to a particular innovation goes. When thinking about these groups, don't imagine it's your job to shift people from one segment to another. It doesn't work that way. It's best to think of the membership of each segment as *static*. Innovations spread when they evolve to meet the needs of successive segments.

i) **Innovators:** The adoption process begins with a tiny number of visionary, imaginative innovators. They often lavish great time, energy and creativity on developing new ideas and gadgets. And they love to talk about them. Right now, they're the ones busily building stills to convert cooking oil into diesel fuel and making websites to tell the world about it. Unfortunately their one-eyed fixation on a new behaviour or gadget can make them seem dangerously idealistic to the pragmatic majority. Yet no change program can thrive without their energy and commitment. How to work with innovators:

- Track them down and become their —first followers, providing support and publicity for their ideas.

- Invite keen innovators to be partners in designing your project.

ii) **Early adopters:** Once the benefits start to become apparent, early adopters leap in. They are on the lookout for a strategic leap forward in their lives or businesses and are quick to make connections between clever innovations and their personal needs. They love getting an advantage over their peers and they have time and money to invest. They're often fashion conscious and love to be seen as leaders: social prestige is one of their biggest drivers.

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Their natural desire to be trend setters causes the —take-off of an innovation. Early adopters tend to be more economically successful, well connected and well informed and hence more socially respected. Their seemingly risky plunge into a new activity sets tongues wagging. Others watch to see whether they prosper or fail, and people start talking about the results. And early adopters like to talk about their successes. So the buzz intensifies. What early adopters say about an innovation determines its success. The more they crow and preen, the more likely the new behaviour or product will be perceived positively by the majority of a population.

Early adopters are vital for another reason. They become an independent test bed, ironing out the chinks and reinventing the innovation to suit mainstream needs. Fortunately early adopters are an easy audience. They don't need much persuading because they are on the lookout for anything that could give them a social or economic edge. When you call a public meeting to discuss energy-saving devices or new farming methods, they're the ones who come along. They're the first people in your block to install a water tank, mulch their garden, buy laptops for their kids, or install solar panels.

Some authorities talk about a —chasm between visionary early adopters and pragmatic majorities. They think the chasm explains why many products are initially popular with early adopters but crash and burn before they reach mass markets. Everett Rogers disagreed with the idea of a chasm. He thought early adopters and majorities formed a continuum. However *most* early adopters still have radically different interests and needs from *most* majorities, so even if there's no real chasm it's a useful mental construct that warns us against the easy assumption that one size fits all. Once again, what makes products or practices spread is not persuasion but rather whether the product or behaviour is being reinvented to become easier, simpler, quicker, cheaper, and more advantageous. How to work with early adopters:

Offer strong face-to-face support for a limited number of early adopters to trial the new idea.

- Study the trials carefully to discover how to make the idea more convenient, low cost and marketable.
- Reward their egos e.g. with media coverage.
- Promote them as fashion leaders (beginning with the cultish end of the media market).
- Recruit and train some as peer educators.

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- Maintain relationships with regular feedback.

iii) **Early majority:** Assuming the product or behaviour leaps the chasm, it may eventually reach majority audiences. Early majorities are pragmatists, comfortable with moderately progressive ideas, but won't act without solid proof of benefits. They are followers who are influenced by mainstream fashions and wary of fads. They want to hear —industry standard and —endorsed by normal, respectable folks. Majorities are cost sensitive and risk averse. They are looking for simple, proven, better ways of doing what they already do. They require guaranteed off-the-shelf performance, minimum disruption, minimum commitment of time, minimum learning, and either cost neutrality or rapid payback periods. And they hate complexity. They haven't got time to think about your product or project. They're too busy getting the kids to football and running their businesses. If they do have spare time they're not going to spend it fussing around with complicated, expensive, inconvenient products or behaviours. They want to hear —plug-and-play, —no sweat or —user-friendly and —value for money. How to work with the early majority:

Offer give-aways or competitions to stimulate buzz.

Use mainstream advertising and media stories featuring endorsements from credible, respected, similar folks.

- Lower the entry cost and guarantees performance.
- Redesign to maximise ease and simplicity.
- Cut the red tape: simplify application forms and instructions
- Provide strong customer service and support.

iv) **Late majority:** They are conservative pragmatists who hate risk and are uncomfortable your new idea. Practically their only driver is the fear of not fitting in, hence they will follow mainstream fashions and established standards. They are often influenced by the fears and opinions of laggards. How to work with the late majority:

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- Focus on promoting social norms rather than just product benefits: they'll want to hear that plenty of other conservative folks like themselves think it's normal or indispensable.
- Keep refining the product to increase convenience and reduce costs.
- Emphasise the risks of being left behind.
- Respond to criticisms from laggards.

v) **Laggards:** Meanwhile laggards hold out to the bitter end. They are people who see a high risk in adopting a particular product or behaviour. Some of them are so worried they stay awake all night, tossing and turning, thinking up arguments against it. And don't forget they might be right! It's possible they are not really not laggards at all, but innovators of ideas that are so new they challenge your paradigms! In the early stages, where you are focusing on early adopters, you can probably ignore the views of laggards, but when you come to work with late majorities you'll need to address their criticisms, because late majorities share many of their fears. How to work with laggards:

- Give them high levels of personal control over when, where, how and whether they do the new behaviour.
- Maximize their familiarity with new products or behaviours. Let them see exactly how other laggards have successfully adopted the innovation.

Each of these adopter personalities is very different. It's vital to know which one you are addressing at a given time. And no, you usually can't address them all at once. Why? Because products and behaviours only mature gradually. The exception is when you have customized quite *different* products or behaviors for each group.

Rogers went as far as assigning precise notional percentages for each segment:

- Innovators: 2.5%
- Early Adopters: 13.5%

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- Early majority: 34%
- Late majority 34%
- Laggards 16%

However the —20:60:20 Rule is a good all-purpose rule of thumb. When designing a change project you need to know one vital fact: the percentage who has already taken up the innovation. That figure tells you which segment you are addressing *next*. It gives you great insight into how to design your project and how to pitch your communications.

Of course, no one is an innovator or a laggard about all new ideas. That would be too exhausting. In reality, most people are majorities about most things, and only innovators or laggards about certain specific things. We wouldn't say —John is a laggard, we'd say —John is an *iPhone* laggard or —George Bush snr is a *broccoli* laggard.

### Further Reading

- The standard text is Everett M. Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations*, Fifth Edition 2003, Free Press, New York. It's thorough, readable, and strongly recommended for anyone who's serious about initiating change.