

In product design, imagining end user's feelings leads to more original outcomes

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In new product design, connecting with an end user's heart, rather than their head, can lead to more original and creative outcomes, says published research co-written by Ravi Mehta, a professor of business administration at Illinois and an expert in product development and marketing. Credit: Gies College of Business

Developing original and innovative products is critical to a company's long-term success and competitive advantage. Thus, gaining a better idea of what factors impact how designers cultivate product originality can have important—and potentially profitable—consequences for businesses.

Research co-written by a University of Illinois expert in new product development and marketing indicates that connecting with the end user's heart rather than their head can lead to more original and creative outcomes in [product design](#).

Ravi Mehta, a professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business, shows that adopting an approach that imagines how an end user would feel while using a product leads designers to experience greater empathy, which enhances creativity and, in turn, outcome originality for new product design.

Previous research argues that product designers ought to study how consumers would use a product—and then tailor the product to those specifications.

"There are two ways that the product [designer](#) can imagine the consumer's product usage. One focuses on objective utility of the product—how consumers might use the product. The other focuses on feelings—how the product makes the consumer feel," Mehta said.

"You always want to have new products that solve problems more efficiently, more effectively and at a lesser cost. So product designers fall into this trap of being very objective in focusing on the utility of a product. That's important, but the objectivity of the thought process only takes them so far, because they're not imagining how the product will ultimately make consumers feel."

When designers start incorporating what they perceive the end user's feelings will be into product design, "what that does is enhance empathy for the consumer—and that, in turn, produces more out-of-the-box ideas. That's our big takeaway: When you imagine consumers and focus on their feelings, that's powerful and will lead to something much more innovative than only focusing on a product's utility."

Across five experiments, Mehta and co-author Kelly B. Herd of the University of Connecticut differentiated between a "feelings-imagination" approach versus an "objective-imagination" approach of incorporating an end user during the new product ideation process.

"We found that the feelings-imagination approach leads individuals to experience greater empathic concern, which makes them more receptive to multiple perspectives," Mehta said. "This is reflected in higher levels of cognitive flexibility, which, in turn, leads to greater outcome originality."

Taken together, the five experiments demonstrated "consistent support" of the framework that a feelings-based approach is superior to the more commonly used objective-based approach, the researchers wrote.

"It turns out that using the heart has more downstream benefits than just using the head," Mehta said. "It not only helps product designers build a better product, but it also helps them create more [innovative products](#)."

The implications of the findings extend to everyday consumers, who now play a role in shaping companies' product lines, Mehta said. Other research has estimated that, in the near future, more than half of consumer goods manufacturers will receive the bulk of their new product ideas from crowdsourcing.

"Marketers are increasingly tapping consumers for new product ideas,"

he said. "For example, there was a very successful campaign a few years ago that focused on getting consumers to create a new potato chip flavor by submitting ideas through their website.

"Our third experiment in the paper demonstrated a positive effect of adopting a feelings-imagination approach in the context of everyday consumers generating ideas in response to a crowdsourcing campaign. That suggests that these [consumers](#)—particularly given their lack of access to observe end users—may benefit from imagining end users' feelings when developing original ideas for products and services that could appeal to the masses. Companies utilizing crowdsourcing techniques can easily adopt this process and prompt feelings-imagination exercises through their websites or social media."

More information: Kelly B Herd et al, Head versus Heart: The Effect of Objective versus Feelings-Based Mental Imagery on New Product Creativity, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucy058](#)

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