Airtel "Open Network": Driving Value from Crowdsourcing

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Abstract

Remarkable achievements have been shown by organizations with a significant change in their mindset about innovation and different methodologies used for it. The users have become more known about everything and when organizations are willing to include the customers they follow processes to where the crowd can come ahead to express their views and ideas. This culture of open participation and collective intelligence of an organisation has given birth to more innovations. In organisations, it helps management to identify multiple solutions to a single problem, shared with its community; The crowd. The present case explores- how organisations are using initiatives like crowdsourcing to capture the wisdom of the crowd. To explore the research objectives the present case uses exploratory research design. This case was written based on narrations taken through personal interviews with project (open network) representatives at Airtel as well as with customers using Airtel connection. Secondary information was collected from Airtel website, reports, newspaper articles, journals and other web-portals. Through this case, researchers have identified the factors in an innovation ecosystem that are required for the collaborative approach used by organisations and reach a win-win solution, and what benefits an organisation can achieve out of such initiatives.

Keywords: *Collective intelligence, Crowdsourcing, Open Innovation, Open Participation, Social Media.*

1. Background of the Study

The India's no. 1 network provider- Airtel started its crowdsourcing initiative in June 2016. It released a 360-degree new Ad campaign to encourage the customer to engage in its initiative with a tagline "*because you have a lot to say and we have nothing to hide*". This advertisement captured the attention of users and non-users, who actively participated through social media to provide feedback on Airtel open network. Organisations adopt the strategy of crowdsourcing (open innovation) to gain maximum inputs from the public to value create in their existing business models. Through this crowdsourcing, it was observed that the crowd started giving feedback and reviews to Airtel about the signal connectivity, network availability and voice call quality etc. in their local community. While the innovation started happening through the crowd resolving the network issues, Airtel managed to improve its performance by locating new geographical areas for building towers, increasing its bandwidth connectivity and improving technological space for its users. Today Airtel has developed a structured customer feedback strategy for collecting and analytically managing the inputs received from the crowd. The present

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case study was constructed with the following research questions to understand the relevance and significance of crowdsourcing for present day organizations.

- How did Airtel utilise the crowdsourcing model to improve its network performance and customer experience?
- What were the Airtel initiatives to encourage crowd for participating in the crowdsourcing process?
- What are the key learnings for the competitors to use or not to use crowdsourcing initiative?

2. Introduction

According to Jeff Howe, Crowdsourcing refers to sharing/outsourcing/subcontracting organisational problems related to product or services to the community for identifying a solution. In this process, organizations must make deliberate efforts to ensure that the problem is only outsourced to a crowd that is fully aware of the organizational issue. Such initiatives require cautious steps to be taken by the organisation to understand on what to reveal to the users, mediums to be used for such revelations and most importantly to make sure that the crowd to whom its outsourced is aware of the organisational issue. When an organization starts receiving feedback from the crowd they quickly shortlist the views ideas and operationalize it through best possible implementation plan that would gain mutual benefit. This urges organizations to strategize carefully the crowdsourcing framework and a defined strategic intent to realise maximum benefit from open innovation process.

2.1. Airtel

Market share of mobile network operators as on 1 march 2017	
• Airtel: 256.8 million (22.6%) • Vodafone: 199.7 million (17.6%) • Idea: 176.49 million (15.5%) • Jio: 105 million (9.2%) • RCom: 95.46 million (8.4%) • BSNL: 90.71 million (8.0%) • Aircel: 89.33 million (7.9%) • Tata Docomo: 58.67 million (5.2%)	Airtel as a globally operating Telecom company. Its inception date to July 1995. The Bharti Airtel company is well known for satisfying the customer needs across markets.

Recently to get a better understanding of Airtel's products & services, Airtel in collaboration with Taproot India designed a platform for crowdsourcing that would help Airtel's consumers to suggest on predefined parameters by Airtel to gather probable places to set its towers and achieve effectiveness by improving its network connectivity. This process was implemented online and majorly promoted through newspaper, television advertisement and various social media campaigns. Airtel utilised social networking medium to connect to its customers for building on crowdsourcing model of open innovation. The entire agenda focused on understanding the experience of its customers and gaining valuable information for resolving the issue. Therefore, Airtel to visible promote crowdsourcing and open innovation has created a website on open network, myAirtel app, customer service centres, Airtel stores, social media engagement with Facebook, Twitter etc. to help Airtel receive excessive feedback on network issues from customers.

2.1. Open Network Initiative- Airtel's Operating Model

Open Network initiative by Airtel was focused to enrich its customers with a better network and to move up the value chain and improve the customer satisfaction. To achieve this aim Airtel

decided the status of the customer to be a business partner for gaining quality excellence in their service offerings. In fact, Airtel opened all network related information to their customers for encouraging the users and non-users to provide appropriate network feedback. In this digital market space, it is observed that majority of the customers have access for the internet to gain product and service information. These internet users are potentially creative problem solvers (Brabham, 2013, p. 14). Hence, Airtel's strategy was to create an open sharing platform that gives each one of its customers and non-users a view of the location of tower maps, weak network zones, strong signal zones, areas coming up with new towers, de-installed tower areas etc. This means the crowd can see what Airtel as an organization had access to. It led the crowd to gain more information, Comment, suggest, seek better service, analyse and be a partner in building a truly great network.

To generate detailed insight into the customers' needs and to give the creation process a goal-oriented structure, Airtel has separated the project into two consecutive phases and interdependent phases. In the first phase, they announced the open network initiative, encouraged customers to give their opinion on how to improve the service. In the second phase, Airtel requested to customers to suggest the probable places where they can set up their network towers. The outcome of this initiative required Airtel to reach to remote zones and satisfy its customers' expectations about the network coverage.

3. Crowdsourcing and Airtel's Break-Even

The term crowdsourcing is a combination of the words 'crowd' and 'outsourcing'. The idea is to take work and outsource it to a crowd of workers. Jeff Howe, who coined this term defined it as "the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call". Oxford Dictionary defines 'Crowdsourcing as a method to obtain (information or input into a task or project) by enlisting the services of several people, either paid or unpaid, typically via the Internet'. Stefan Lindegaard defines 'Crowdsourcing as a tool that can be used to bring external inputs into your organisation' (Lindegaard, 2013). Daren suggests, that 'it is a distributed problem-solving and production model' (Brabham, 2013). To sum-up, Crowdsourcing is the process of getting work or funding, usually online, from a crowd of people. The crowd/group or community works for a common goal - often innovation, problem-solving, or efficiency. Crowdsourcing can help to innovate processes. Both, the business and the crowd should mutually benefit from this collaborative process. It is a problem-solving model, as it enables an organisation to confront with a problem. It works efficiently by leveraging technology to attract an online community through the Internet. Thus, Crowdsourcing mirrors the social-collaborative mindset of audiences who are accustomed to communicate and share knowledge in a world where information is freely available with no organisational barriers. Airtel through this campaign has:

- Created visibility to its customers about their operations.

- Ensured better indoor coverage and network to mobile users.

- Fixed legacy networks with new equipment by making investments in additional spectrum and fibre.

- Voluntarily implemented 25% more stringent mobile call drop benchmark of 1.5% versus 2% prescribed by the TRAI[1].

3.1. Customer's Perspective on Open Network by Airtel

To understand the perspective of telecom users for the open network initiative by Airtel. A short question was discussed with few friends and colleagues. The Perspective shared, on this

initiative of Airtel, by the targeted people are enlisted below. The crowd thinks that this initiative of Airtel:

1. Is a strategic move by Airtel for taking prior approval from customers for the installation of towers.

2. Has given them an audacity through sharing their experience with Airtel customer care team.

3. Can build rapport with customer and customers can feel apathy for the company for the poor network because Airtel couldn't install tower due to customer objection.

4. At the back-end building data for future tower installation, saving the site acquisition charges/ time/ resources in future.

5. High market penetration focus.

3.2. Inspire to Share- The External Stakeholder- Airtel's Way

There is an extensive research that focuses on the human dimension of crowdsourcing. Most of the researcher have either explored who, why, and how the crowd participates or studies uncovered motivational elements for gaining user- nonuser to engage in crowdsourcing campaigns. It is observed by Daren C. Brabham that the ideas to a problem come from both amateurs and professionals (Brabham, 2013, p. 56). Following is an inclusive list of various research studies that provides a glimpse of various motivational factors to pull a crowd to participate in crowdsourcing. Airtel open network project team observed that satisfaction is more rewarding than money and for their users' nothing is as rewarding as better connectivity and low call tariff. In the case of Airtel, the agenda for crowdsourcing was to find the best idea, for providing better services for customers. Airtel aimed at creating a psychological appeal to customers as being partners of the organization. Hence, as rewarding point, Airtel has come up with a new section "Network Stories" in Open Network portal. This has sections to encourage testimonials from its satisfied customers (Report, 2016).

3.3. Inspire to Execute- Internal Stakeholder

HR Fraternity at Airtel believes that the new mandate for the HRM professionals in such initiatives is to create an agile organisational culture with preparedness for accommodating new ideas from stakeholders. There are few studies that suggested the key elements in an organisational culture that HR leaders can work and change. An article by PWC, on the topic harnessing the power of crowdsourcing, has suggested few key HR practices for organisations to excel through crowdsourcing. Such as Corporate culture shifting towards a digital ecosystem, managing millennial expectations about their distinct relationship with employers, no hierarchies (Scupola & Nicolajsen, 2013), change people management strategies, collaborative digital enterprise, community-centric culture, lead the change vs. follow and catch-up, channelize the creativity of employees, attract the best talent in the 21st century[1]. Manel Alcalde, in his blog on the topic Crowdsourcing for an organisational culture, has suggested they key corporate attributes that help organisations achieve the desired organisational goals of crowdsourcing. They are giving employees a voice, fostering an exchange of knowledge (Scupola & Nicolajsen, 2015), decentralised communication policies, participative corporate blogs, participative work culture (Scupola & Nicolajsen, 2013), establishing technological tools that facilitate exchange and collaboration (Alcalde, 2012). Chris Cancialosi, in his article on the topic Shatter Today's Organisational Myths by Crowdsourcing Culture, has suggested three key organisational transitions through which organisations can achieve sustained innovations. They are 1) creating a strong

culture, 2) including a say from every stakeholder will provide more insights and effective solutions and, 3) engaging people on a regular basis can leverage the collective intelligence (Cancialosi, 2014). These are creating awareness of innovation, empower employees and support collaborations across different organisational units (Scupola A., 2014) (Scupola & Nicolajsen, 2013). Few HRM practices suggested by Jeremy Morgan, in her article on organisational crowdsourcing are, hiring teams with diverse background, empower listening culture, meritocracy of best thinking, found discipline, focus on employee connection, employee crowdsourcing programs, promote empathy through technology, reinvent business models, culture of participation and sharing[2], transform customer experience through services and facilitate targeted conversation across time zones (Scupola & Nicolajsen, 2013). Roy, Yannig, Jean-Francois have suggested that inculcating divergent thinking for creativity performance can enable organisational culture to practice open innovation (Chua, 2014).

4. Relevance and Significance

Innovation earlier was about four people discussing their imaginations in a board room. Today customers want to design their own products and given the opportunity from a few representatives of stakeholders to a wholesome dispersed crowd comes ahead to express their views and ideas. Through open innovation strategy, organisations have embraced crowd-sourcing (Uber, OLA, Airtel, Infosys), consumer-led innovations (Kohler India), co creation (Craftsvilla.com), Business Model Innovation (Make my trip) and so on and have greater consumer awareness with visibility in the market (Pathak, 2016). The whole ecosystem of an organisation, which is willing to adopt open innovation initiatives, have a big role to play. Recently, Present Government in India's had launched a new version of a website, enabling creative dialogues between Indian citizens and policy makers. This website enables policy-makers to generate and access public views on policies through opinion polls and surveys (Ambani, 2015). Crowdsourcing in the coming times will be routine for independent governance and a tool for gathering public inputs. Such initiatives will be focused on improving transparency and efficiency. Henceforth, giving birth to a significant diligent review based creative-production application appearing in various governmental contexts, enabling people to trust more (Brabham, 2013, p. 103).

5. Conclusion

Present day organisations are on the verge of new age transformation due to digital evolution. Customers look forward to innovations taking place from the companies. On one hand, organizations have capabilities to innovate and on other hand, customers are full of ideas. A collaboration between two has been experienced by many organization with positive results. There are factors available at both the sides of innovation i.e. organisation and its customers. It just needs willingness for stakeholders to come together and find ways to innovate, design new products and services, have mutual benefits and work for a cause i.e. problems faced by either one sides or both. Researchers suggest that organisations need to change the business model they have and include an element of collaboration in the new business model innovated. Organisations must collaborate with their consumers using open innovation typologies such as cocreation (Pathak, 2017), user-led innovation (Pathak, 2016) or crowdsourcing. It can be understood that organizations not willing to adopt for collaborative approach of innovation will pay heavy costs (Turner, 2011). Daren suggests future will be whereby corporate research and development work will be soon entrusted to the crowd. Crowdsourcing will be deployed to accelerate and improve public serving interventions and reporting violations too (Brabham, 2013, p. 106).
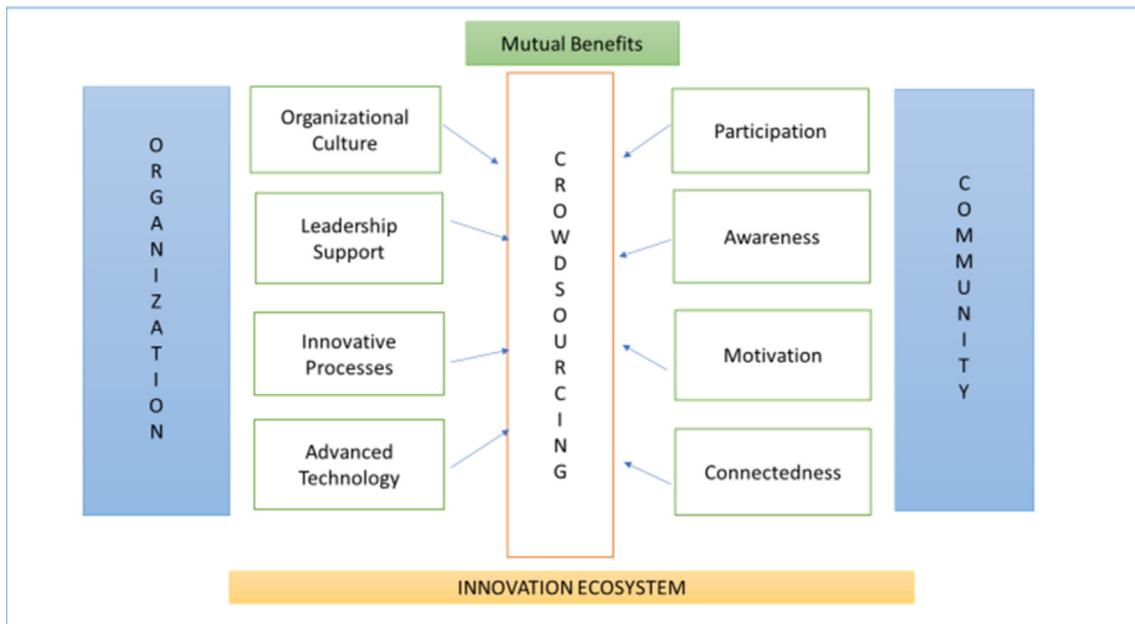
Figure 1: Critical Success Factor to Crowdsource in an Innovative Ecosystem
Source: Researcher's work

Airtel has set this transformation in adopting advanced market share of customers by engaging them in the process of improvisation rather than just product-led approach. Airtel has produced a statement of listening to its customers and giving them the power to judge on improved services. Where other operators from telecom industry are trying to gain market share through new products/schemes, Airtel has already lifted its reputation up in Indian market with its new strategic move of crowdsourcing. It has not only give Airtel's customers a sense of connectedness but Airtel as an organization has also benefitted with being on no. 1 in market share through its services, has penetrated markets across regions and has set up a new market with new customers.

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