"Why Don't You Listen To Me...For A Change?"

If the user is king, user feedback should be valued as a means for a tech firm to forge ahead, by fine-tuning its product to suit many more users. But the big question is—do Indian tech firms subscribe to this belief?

The fortune cookie

Product or service—any offering needs to be shaped and fine-tuned according to users' needs. Industry experts give their opinion on whether Indian tech firms are doing that. Are you?

"Sending e-mails expressing their exasperation to non-specific info@so-and-so-company.com addresses marks the extent to which Indian tech users contribute to the tech innovation process." Do you agree? If this scenario was true, it would imply that Indian tech firms are deaf to their users' feedback, and never proactively go 'out there' to find out what users want—perhaps because they believe that big innovations are never triggered by user inputs, but through in-house R&D and brainwaves alone.

In order to discover whether Indian tech firms are really cut off from (or, conversely, connected with) their users, we brought on board Anthony P D'Costa, professor of Indian Studies, Asia Research Centre, Copenhagen Business School; Sanjay Dalal, president & managing director, Innovation Index Group Inc; Mohan Verma, executive director, PricewaterhouseCoopers; Vinay Goel, head–Products, Google India; and Amit Ranjan, co-founder, SlideShare (www.slideshare.net) and founder, India Technology Blog, Webyantra (www.webyantra.net).

"Our processes are iterative; we believe in launching products early and often, and learning and refining them based on user feedback."

Vinay Goel, head–Products, Google India

Do tech firms listen, or play deaf?

In Dalal's view, Indian tech firms are increasingly listening to their end users, and determining their specific needs and wants. Industry leaders Infosys, TCS and Wipro have developed some of the most innovative practices to determine and deliver their client needs. Finacle, a universal banking solution from Infosys that empowers banks to transform their business, was in 2008 positioned in the Leaders Quadrant in the Gartner Magic Quadrant for International Retail Core Banking. So, according to Dalal, "Indian IT service firms are foremost in getting detailed customer feedback. Finacle from Infosys has become a market leader [product] in the international banking sector, in large part due to Infosys' core strength in the IT services business, which created the systems and processes to obtain useful customer feedback. Infosys was able to transform its strengths in the IT services business to IT software."

But not everyone shares this view. Verma, for instance, points out that a lot depends "…on the initial idea–if it is a brainwave that forges new concepts never tried before, then a lot of it would be based on internal discussions— probably with the help of a 'close' client, where a Conference Room Pilot would be run. If it is something that is also a subject matter of IP, then again it would be done behind closed doors."

Listening to end users mandates a direct connect

Ranjan opines that, at an overall level, "The IT industry in India is dominated by service companies that take on development work for external clients; hence many companies may not have a direct interface with the customers [read end users]." Other companies serve users who are geographically removed from their location, in which case distance [from customers] sometimes deters client feedback. Of course, Ranjan agrees that for those [firms] that are working on their own products, user research or feedback is paramount. Yet, although he would like to believe that they are engaging in this process, it is also a fact that, "Indian firms are not particularly known the world over for their innovation."

Bingo–Ranjan seems to have hit the nail on the head! But as for the reasons for this state of affairs, he thinks they lie beyond a firm's ability or willingness to listen to its customers.

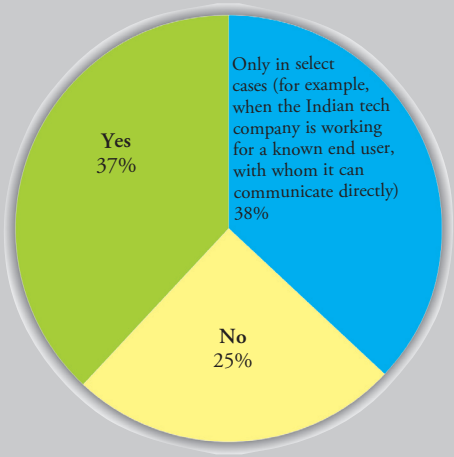
The 'missing' link in the Indian innovation chain

D'Costa is well positioned to shed light on this aspect. His paper, *Export Growth and Path Dependence: The Locking-in of Innovations in the Software Industry,* based on survey data from 1999 onwards, and revalidated by the results of a similar survey conducted for another project in 2005, brings out the challenges that developing countries face when they have a poor economy—and thus poor users, and hence a missing link in the innovation process. This 'missing' link arises also due to the fact that Indian firms are structurally oriented toward export markets, thereby bypassing the domestic market.

Like Ranjan, D'Costa also points out that the Indian IT industry predominantly serves clients in the US, and does not necessarily get to

The Voice of the People

India's IT industry, comprising a plethora of tech firms, may be doing a lot for the country as a whole -- from earning valuable foreign exchange to employing hordes of young talent. But what is it doing for its users? Do Indian tech firms listen to their users or ignore their feedback? In other words, do IT companies care about the Voice of the People? On behalf of 'i.t.' Charu Bahri collated the opinions of a few industry experts.



Do Indian tech firms listen to their users?

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"I tend to disagree with the belief that Indian tech companies are not accountable to their users. The scenario is changing, and many new start-up Indian tech companies are actually coming up with customised innovative solutions [based on] customer feedback. With the boom in new product companies, Indian users can look forward to enjoying quality solutions that will give the IT majors a run for their money. In short, happy days are ahead for the end customer."

—Divya

"I think Indian technology companies simply don't care. They adopt a strategy of 'Deliver and disappear' due to two main reasons:

- The market for technology products is growing at such a high rate that they are not bothered about customer retention or loyalty. The sheer numbers give them the arrogant belief that ripping off one customer will not hurt them.
- The legal system in India is so overloaded and expensive (for an individual) to pursue cases against companies that these companies know very well that they can rip off customers and get away with it.

People who have dealt with cell phone companies will attest to just how callous and uncaring they can be. In fact, the biggest cell phone company in India can be an example of 'how to lose customers and permanently hand them over to competition'. Trust me, the day mobile number portability comes in, the churn rates will go through the roof as customers will vote with their wallets and walk out. Sad, but true. India–the back office to the world–is a shining example of corporate greed, arrogance and a sheer 'don't care' attitude towards customer service. That is why the very few cases when companies have actually cared and done something, stand out."

—P V G Menon

"There is no serious practice yet, but it is high time that companies start involving customer feedback process in their development system. Today, the user is more knowledgable and demanding, and I think that's bound to increase further...so the need to put such a process in place becomes mandatory!"

—Lohith

The respondents

Name	Designation / Organisation
Anthony P D'Costa	Professor of Indian Studies, Asia Research Centre, Copenhagen Business School
Sanjay Dalal	President & managing director, Innovation Index Group Inc.
Mohan Verma	Executive director, PricewaterhouseCoopers
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Amit Ranjan	Co-founder, SlideShare (www.slideshare.net) and founder, India Technology Blog, Webyantra (www.webyantra.net)
PVG Menon	President & CEO, VANN Consulting
Lohith Rao	Graphics/UI designer
Divya	Senior consultant, Hanmer MS&L

well as those on the International Google Labs page. But Goel elucidates, "The future of these products depends on the feedback received from users. Feedback helps Google gauge product acceptance and further improve the products. Since these offerings are in the beta stage, Google is constantly improving them." Evidently, at Google, innovation is all about developing new global technologies, products and services... inspired by the needs of users.

Accept that user feedback will contribute to incremental innovation

Of course, one would tend to think that if users were discerning enough to clearly state what they want, it would make the process of product development so much easier. However, Dalal opines that even though users know their problems and the challenges at work, the key is to uncover their unmet needs and challenges, and provide a solution that makes users go 'wow'. Ranjan endorses this fact, saying, "Breakthrough ideas for innovative products (contrary to popular belief) usually do not emerge from stated needs. Needs are often latent, and the users may not have the ability to clearly express these. In that sense, the ideation itself is unlikely to be influenced by user feedback."

Nevertheless, he continues, "Once the basic idea has been germinated, user feedback plays a crucial role in fine-tuning it. Here, the role of users is paramount and irreplaceable. Building products is never a one-time effort. Innovation is often romanticised as a knee-jerk process (the Eureka feeling!); however, that's just the stereotype. [In truth,] it is always a long-drawn-out process, with frequent changes, refinements etc. A big part of innovation is actually incremental in nature (small strides in short bursts), where the particular causal incidents are largely forgettable. Feedback is a critical part of the incremental process, and helps you in making progress in leaps and bounds."

Foster a culture of continuous user feedback

It goes without saying that feedback is critical for future innovation. Dalal emphasises the need to generate continuous and useful feedback. Creative ideas born from the feedback must make business sense, in terms of cost and benefits.

But as D'Costa opines, given that feedback is a continuous process, it is hard to immediately pinpoint useful feedback. What is imperative is to build up a culture of providing feedback; not merely a mechanistic culture of obtaining feedback (like at Indian railway stations!), but one for incorporating relevant feedback. All incoming feedback should be sorted into categories. Some will be more useful than the rest. But this is something we only know after obtaining it. So, it is counterproductive to begin with useful feedback! He cites the example of the Kaizen system in Japanese plants, where continuous process improvements never stop. All workers are expected to suggest improvements, and those whose suggestions are implemented are rewarded financially and socially. However, D'Costa emphasises, "Open, democratic societies, on the one hand, and flatter business systems and government, on the other, are necessary institutions to foster a culture of user feedback."

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Who are the users that tech firms should approach?

In answer to that question, Dalal lists the need for Indian IT firms to know and understand the specific requirements of the end user who actually uses the product, the budget and pain points of the recommender who is in a position to influence the buying decision, and the buyer who has the financial authority to purchase the product. It is not enough to create a great product and only market it to the end user.

D'Costa feels feedback should be sought specifically from lower-income groups who may be socially less empowered, yet who may provide useful insights as to how inexpensive products ought to function in their specific environments. Apparently, Nokia has a design centre in India that

specifically tries to draw some feedback from rural users of their phones.

Bridging geographic divides

Thanks to technologies like the Internet, VoIP (voice over Internet protocol), and the possibility of physical travel for one-on-one interactions, D'Costa opines that geographical distance is not a hindrance to the process of getting user feedback. However, this is not to say that geographical distance has no impact. "Knowledge may be either tacit or codified; while the former cannot be easily codified, as it rests on local culture, organisational culture and collective knowledge; the latter is what gets transferred. But this is inadequate to contribute to a full-blown form of innovation," says D'Costa. Nevertheless, Dalal proposes that if an Indian tech firm has the ability to channel appropriate products and operations managers in the geographies where they service their clients, these differences may be surmounted.

Methods to engage with users

When it comes to actually soliciting feedback, Dalal lists e-mail, conference calls, face-to-face interactions, Web seminars, user forums and surveys as useful methods. Ranjan explains that the method will "…depend on the type of segment a firm operates in, the situation, available resources, etc. A firm in the enterprise space might need direct one-to-one sessions with a more structured approach. Formalised

Sanjay Dalal, president & managing director, Innovation Index Group Inc

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market research plays an important role here. Product complaints are often rich sources of information about how to solve critical problems. However, formalised research plays less of a role for a firm in the consumer space (especially Internet-oriented). Many of the insights [here] are based on intuition, often impulsive and individual-oriented. Listening to people's reactions on blogs, forums, etc can play a pivotal role. What also plays a role is that companies in the enterprise space [usually] have larger set-ups, scale and manpower than those in the consumer space."

Dalal adds, "It is always a good idea to triangulate the received feedback to confirm its validity, and to ensure a large enough sampling size from the end user population." He quotes *Chuck Palus* and *David Horth's The Leader's Edge: Six Creative Competencies for Navigating Complex Challenges*, which lists the need to 'foster new knowledge' by doing something different, out of your own domain, as a means to find innovation. For starters, go "…spend a week with your customer. Understand the problems your customer faces on a day-to-day basis; not just for your product, but everywhere else. Gain new insights on how your customers do business with *their* customers."

Speaking of how small endeavours lead to incremental innovation, Ranjan shares the example of how Sharekhan recently launched its Idea do! iPod Lo! contest (http://www.sharekhan.com/Campaign/ipod/15042008.html), which encouraged members and visitors to submit their ideas towards making Sharekhan.com a better website. By giving participants a chance to win one iPod every day, Sharekhan adopted a simple yet effective means to ensure user feedback or ideas that could improve its online image and efficiency.

Undoubtedly, if a tech firm or tech-based endeavour intends to stay in business in the long run, 'connect–listen–incorporate feedback' is a winning formula that it can't ignore. IT

User-feedback led innovation

For more examples of how user-feedback led to innovation in the industrial world, D'Costa suggests Von Hippel's books on innovation –The Sources of Innovation (1988) and Democratizing Innovation (2005).

Charu Bahri
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