Creativity and innovation by empowering the customer: The case of Mulino Bianco. Part II: The digital customer value added

A Bujor and S Avasilcăi

“Gheorghe Asachi” Technical University of Iasi, Department of Engineering and Management, Bd. D. Mangeron 29, Iasi, Romania

E-mail: silvia.avasilcai@gmail.com

Abstract. The terms of creativity, co-creation, creative industries, innovation, and co-innovation are more and more used nowadays. While co-creation offers the possibility and encourages a more active involvement from the customers to create value rich experiences, innovation is responsible for the little improvements made for a better life, to grow a business, to improve products, services or company’s productivity. Either customers, current and potential, or stakeholders’ involvement into innovation activities, through their creativity, represent an important way of value creation, of actions’ performance that increases the worth of goods, services, or business as a whole. More and more, different size businesses gather ideas for innovation from customers / stakeholders by involving them into the early stages of the innovation process. Actually, it has been shown that their ideas sketch their needs and wishes, and have been described as “need information”. Customers and stakeholders, in general, also offer ideas that have been called “solution information”, which represents, not only need information, but also customer-based proposals that describe how ideas can be transformed into marketable products. The term of creative industries refers to those goods that can technically be reproduced, industrially produced, and commercially sold, this being one of the many definitions found in the literature. Mulino Bianco was first launched in Italy, being one of the value brands of Barilla Group, which we can say, according to the Italian definition and classification, it belongs to creative industries: industry of food and taste. Even though Barilla Group’s Research & Development department does its job very efficiently, developing and creating new products under different brands, lately a key strategy for the Group and for Mulino Bianco, by default, is customers’ pro-active involvement in products’ development or creation. One of the tools used for this is the Internet Toolkit and Web 2.0, by means of which customers are being invited to participate in competitions, being asked to design and share their concepts / views for new products, or to get involved in by voting those ideas they best like and would love to find them on markets. The aim of this paper is to explore and identify the involvement of stakeholders in Mulino Bianco’s product development or improvement through creativity and innovation. As methodology approach, a case study about Mulino Bianco was done, and the foreseen result is highlighting the Nel Mulino Che Vorrei platform’s features for consumer’s engagement in the value creation and co-creation.

1. Introduction

Innovation gets in or out of fashion as a strategic factor for corporate growth, but with each wave of enthusiasm, managers make the same mistakes. Most often, they stumble in their research and
development because they are engaged in a difficult balancing act: they need to protect existing revenue streams while coaxing along new ones. But “corporate entrepreneurship” needs not to be an oxymoron, and innovation can flourish if business executives heed lessons of the past.[1]

In order to innovate and to develop products taking into account the level of fat, sugar and salt, which have been given for every category, to reformulate already existent products, in order to reduce some nutrients, in 2013 Barilla invested 40 million Euros only in research and development activities that target both products and processes.

Mulino Bianco has always been concerned with its costumers’ needs. Moreover, as time passes, the brand has been trying to decipher these needs and their desires. Today, through the new communication channels that facilitate relations, Mulino Bianco is convinced that the time for growth together with their customers is the best.

2. Mulino Bianco’s Projects

Mulino Bianco was The initiated and implemented projects of Mulino Bianco generally target both participants’ involvement, as they contribute with innovative ideas, and Mulino Bianco experts’ involvement, who evaluate the ideas that participants have introduced and various interested categories, such as: the existing costumers, and the potential customers who contribute by voting the proposed ideas.

The projects / events that take place under Mulino Bianco’s brand name, and which are dedicated to proactive involvement of clients / stakeholders in innovative processes are: Nel Mulino Che Vorrei; I Talenti del Mulino, Buona Merenda; Una Sana Abitudine, Momenti di Pane Sapori Autentici; Il Tour del Mulino.

Among the listed projects, Mulino Bianco has launched Nel Mulino che vorrei (The Mulino that you wished for) in order to collect ideas from those who want to get involved. All ideas are analyzed to confirm they are consistent with the mission, vision and values of Mulino Bianco, to finally be realized together [2] Without any prejudices, through this project the Mulino Bianco staff has entered the game, ready to listen to any proposal that is consistent with their daily work. They aim considering all ideas while they invite everyone to vote for the best of them, and in return, they promise transparency and involvement. All ideas receive a public feedback that include feasibility data and reasons why they have been chosen [2].

The Nel Munino Che Vorrei project functions according to several well-established rules, which provide organization and simplicity. There will be no prizes that involve money or objects and the participation is spontaneous and is based on relation parity [3]:

- those who participate as interested individuals have a wish, a need, an idea that they would like Mulino Bianco to bring into reality;
- Mulino Bianco wants to be closer to people’s needs and to improve itself in a manner suggested by costumers.

Basically, the Nel Mulino Che Vorrei project came to life on the strength of a wish to collect and satisfy needs, wishes, suggestions and demands of improvement that clients and costumers expressed and thought that will help all of us [4].

The Mulino Bianco crew does not lack ideas, but the design process, as well as the building process needs a step-by-step approach and constant refinement activities in order to bring the best solutions. They are professionals, but their purpose is always the same: to satisfy the needs, demands, and wishes of their clients and customers in general. This is the reason why they consider that it is mainly important to know stakeholders’ opinion before suggesting innovations, which might not meet clients’ needs.

For this reason Mulino Bianco, through the Nel Mulino Che Vorrei project, is aiming to become a listener. The participation of all interested parts is very important: just by expressing opinions, by participating, by sending their own ideas, by commenting, and by voting other ideas which have already been published, we can help Mulino Bianco accomplish what we think is truly important and useful [4].
Those who are interested and wish to participate at this project are able to do it in three ways [5]:

- By sending the idea to the “Ideas for voting” areas. The more clear, descriptive and specific an idea is, the bigger the chances that it would be understood by more people in the community is, therefore it could be considered more valuable. The most voted ten ideas will be evaluated by Mulino Bianco, which can however consider other ideas if they prove valuable too after the evaluation.

- By voting other people’s ideas, as each vote contributes to the process of determining the best ones. The most voted ten ideas will enter the evaluation process regardless of their nature, along with the ones chosen by Mulino Bianco.

- By observing upon other people’s ideas, therefore by contributing with pieces of advice which may improve an idea or simply explain the vote.

All contributions are supervised by Nel Mulino Che Vorrei editors. They will publish posted ideas regardless of their connection to Mulino Bianco’s activities in order to suppress any kind of discrimination. However, the contributions will be rejected if they do not meet the netiquette regulations. It is also very important that participants read the project’s legal notes.

Lastly, all ideas that will be put into practice will be part of Mulino Bianco’s world and will be published on the website. The author of the idea will be invited to the project release, and will write a note concerning his experience as a participant [6].

3. Mulino Bianco stakeholders’ involvement in co-creation in innovation

The tool dedicated to interactions with the stakeholders is the Nel Mulino Che Vorrei platform through which interested parts can discover Mulino Bianco’s projects, suggest their own ideas, vote other participants’ ideas, visualize released projects, and enter the platform’s blog or answer questions asked by Mulino Bianco in opinion polls. On the Nel Mulino Che Vorrei platform, the connection with the participants is carried out by individual accounts created by each participant.

Between the official Mulino Bianco website and the Nel Mulino Che Vorrei platform is a direct link. The platform’s site is: http://www.nelmulinochromevorrei.it, and can be directly accessed from the official Mulino Bianco website. Thanks to this situation, we can say that the visual identity of the project is, in fact, the visual identity of Mulino Bianco’s platform. It is in fact about the Mulino Bianco brand:

![Mulino Bianco’s brand](image)

The process is based on the interaction of different professionals, from the inside of the company, such The preservation of the logo used by the pasta specialized brand, Barilla, as well as the blue font of Mulino Bianco, which is the specific color of Barilla packages is obvious. We can say that tradition is preserved using elements and colors which Barilla accustomed us to since it’s very beginning. Yellow is the background color for the entire platform, therefore it is also used in Mulino Bianco’s logo. This color combines well with the picture found in the logo, which suggestively represents a mill framed by wheat ears.

In this case we can bring into discussion the outsourcing possibility of this tool, as this platform, the first in Italy of this type, is used for idea exchanges between clients in order to underline their needs and wishes that can be brought to life by Mulino Bianco.

The Nel Mulino Che Vorrei project is part of an open innovation strategy that is linked to a process which starts and ends with the costumer (outside-in process) [8]. The Il Mulino Che Vorrei community was founded on 8th of March, 2009 as an example of a co-generation and crowd sourcing project,
representing a workshop opened to everybody. People are able to contact the Mulino Bianco world, to suggest ideas and vote for the original ones. This type of community is a model of changing communication, previously implemented by Mulino Bianco, which does not aim to limit customers to a passive, spectator level, but to transform them into active participants, capable of improving the brand with ideas, experiences, emotions and discussions [8]. The platform can be directly accessed from the first page of Mulino Bianco’s website and is divided in six areas:

- The area in which the project can be discovered – Scopri il progetto
- The area where people can suggest their ideas – Proponi la tua idea
- The area in which people can vote others’ ideas – Vota la idee degli altri
- The area in which people can see realized projects – Guarda i progetti realizzati
- The area where customers can access the blog – Leggi il blog
- The area in which people can answer to Mulino Bianco’s questions – Rispondi al Mulino.

By accessing each of these areas, which are located in the upper side of the website, right in the middle of it, new windows will open containing useful information about each of them. In fact, anyone can understand the topic right from the titles, which are quite suggestive.

As we have already seen, the community aims to collect ideas, to analyze and update them only if they are related to the brand’s mission, vision and values. The company’s management states that they will take into account any idea, even if it is not related to the current offer. Moreover, as transparency is the most important factor in this project, all ideas will be evaluated and a public answer will be posted in case of validity or not, along with the explained reasons why that choice was made.

In order to suggest an idea, people must firstly become a member of the Mulino Bianco community. When first launch, the platform registered 130,000 users, from which 75% of them were women, more precisely mothers, with an average age of 34. At the time of this study, the data recorded by the Nel Mulino Che Vorrei website are: 7567 ideas, 25,326 comments, and 395,060 votes. This data can be found on the right side of the platform, remaining visible when accessing the first three areas.

![Figure 2. Suggested ideas on the platform [7].](image)

The Mulino Bianco competitions/projects target not only current customers, but also potential customers of pastry products. The participation to the Nel Mulino Che Vorrei project is open to every adult person who is registered on the website and is an Italian citizen. We can therefore state that the targeted segment is quite restrictive.

4. The promotion of Mulino Bianco’ projects

From Promoting the projects presented on Nel Mulino Che Vorrei platform is very important in order to collect as many ideas and votes as possible. In addition to the conventional methods, Barilla uses social media to develop creative initiatives. Social media can be defined as a group of Internet users who use the ideological and technological fundaments of Web 2.0 and allow building and sharing the generated content [9].
Social media is a new trend that changes the rules of communication with clients, allowing the company to get involved in direct contact with the final customer, at relatively low costs and high efficiency compared with traditional communication tools [10].

The Mulino Bianco initiative emphasizes, once again, how much social media, so used and loved by customers, enters more and more in the Italian corporation’s environment. *Nel Mulino Che Vorrei* represents a radical approach of Social Media, as it affects both communication and the company [11]. By activating “Facebook Connect”, we connect to our *Nel Mulino Che Vorrei* project account that uses the Facebook address. Until we connect, all actions that we do on the website through the Facebook application will be visible on our Facebook wall. Our votes and comments will be shared with all of our friends, who can also decide to suggest ideas or vote ours [12].

The project team’s advice for all who meet the *Nel Mulino Che Vorrei* website is to take advantage and join, requiring being completed only few simple steps where we will be asked to authorize the publication of the votes and comments, and to accept the terms of use of Facebook and Nel Mulino Che Vorrei project [12].

5. The method of collecting, processing, and analyzing ideas

For The method of collecting, processing and analyzing the suggested ideas depends on the project. In order to participate at every project on the Mulino Bianco platform, registering on the website is mandatory. The user can register by writing down all required information, and after reading the Legal Notes and the Terms and Conditions of participation in competitions. The information must be real and correct in order to be processed according to the privacy policy published on the website. There is only one registration per e-mail allowed.

Once the registration process is complete, the user will receive an e-mail that will confirm the registration on the provided email address. Once registered, the user will be able to participate at any available project by sharing his/hers self-ideas, by voting others’ ideas, by posting comments, and by participating in Mulino Bianco opinion polls that aim the improvement of products.

The *Nel Mulino Che Vorrei* editors supervise all contributions. They will publish all posted ideas, regardless of their connection with the brand’s activity, in order to suppress any kind of discrimination. However, the contributions will be rejected if they do not meet the netiquette regulations. Also, it is very important that participants read the project’s legal notes.

Mulino Bianco has set some internal rules that will guide the process of simultaneously evaluation the most 10 voted ideas and a variable number of options of new ideas from all of the contributors. All ideas entered in the process of evaluation will be vote blocked. Once evaluated, positively or negatively, the ideas will be eliminated from the evaluation list, and subsequently will be published. At the same time, the most voted idea will enter the evaluation process. The evaluation will be performed on two levels [13]:

- On the first level of evaluation, the idea involves the Mulino Bianco Directorate, which gives an opinion on the business idea: such an idea could be eliminated if it is very similar to an already analyzed project in the immediate past, and is not feasible. This phase lasts approximately six weeks.
- On the second level of evaluation, the idea will be evaluated from a cost/benefit point of view, and will enter into the business processes to adapt to periods of development of other projects. If they are positively evaluated, will enter the analysis cycle, and in depth building capacity. This phase requires different times, sometimes very long, depending on the type of idea that is processed.

The actual implementation will be announced on the website, and the required realization times will be identified, procedure that is from time to time evaluated. It is very important to know that timetable implementation for a food industry might take a long time, given the complexity of the tests needed before communication / marketing. For example, starting to produce a new type of biscuit might take 24 months of work. Periodically, Mulino Bianco team will provide information concerning that work stage.[13] Mulino Bianco is committed to providing a complete explanation for each idea that has entered the evaluation process, but that will not be materialized.
6. Conclusions
The In order to innovate and to develop products taking into account the level of fat, sugar and salt, which have been given for every category, to reformulate already existent products, in order to reduce some nutrients, in 2013 Barilla invested 40 million Euros only in research and development activities that target both products and processes.

*Nel Mulino Che Vorrei* project came to life on the strength of a wish to collect and satisfy needs, wishes, suggestions and demands of improvement that clients and costumers expressed and thought that will help all of us.

Through *Nel Mulino Che Vorrei* project, Mulino Bianco is aiming to become a listener. The participation of all interested parts is very important: just by expressing opinions, by participating, by sending their own ideas, by commenting, and by voting other ideas which have already been published, we can help Mulino Bianco accomplish what we think is truly important and useful.

Acknowledgement
This research was undertaken within the framework of the National Research Program PN II, financed by MEN – UEFISCDI, project PN-II-PT-PCCA-2013-4-1811.

References
[1] R B 2006 Innovation *The Classic Traps, Harvard Business Review*
[2] Nel Mulino che Vorrei, http://www.nelmulinochevorrei.it/scopri.html, Accessed: 20/12/2014.
[3] Nel Mulino che Vorrei, http://www.nelmulinochevorrei.it/index.php?ctl=index&cmd=come, Accessed: 20/12/2014.
[4] Nel Mulino che Vorrei, http://www.nelmulinochevorrei.it/index.php?ctl=index&cmd=perche, Accessed: 20/12/2014.
[5] Nel Mulino che Vorrei, http://www.nelmulinochevorrei.it/index.php?ctl=index&cmd=cosa, Accessed: 20/12/2014.
[6] Nel Mulino che Vorrei, http://www.nelmulinochevorrei.it/index.php?ctl=index&cmd=poi, Accessed: 21/12/2014.
[7] Nel Mulino che Vorrei, http://www.nelmulinochevorrei.it/index.html, Accessed: 19/12/2014.
[8] Di Guardo M and Castriota M 2013 The challenge and opportunities of crowdsourcing web communities: an Italian case study *International Journal of Electronic Commerce Studies* pp 79-92
[9] Kaplan A and Haenlein M 2010 Users of the worlds, Unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media *Business Horizons* 53(1) pp 59-68
[10] Martini A, Massa S and Testa S 2014 Customer co-creation projects and the social media: the case of Barilla of Italy *Business Horizons, forthcoming*
[11] Maggi S Blog, Information on http://www.steblog.net/2009/03/nel-mulino-che-vorrei-good-sign-for.html
[12] Nel Mulino che Vorrei, http://www.nelmulinochevorrei.it/connetti-con-facebook.html, Accessed: 21/12/2014.
[13] Nel Mulino che Vorrei, http://www.nelmulinochevorrei.it/index.php?ctl=index&cmd=fara, Accessed: 21/12/2014.