



Customer co-creation projects and social media: The case of Barilla of Italy

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Abstract This article investigates a social media-enabled, customer co-creation project that employs front-end innovation (FEI) at a well-known, large-scale food manufacturer. It sheds light on the role of social media technology in transforming the characteristics of FEI in terms of boundaries and knowledge distance. What type of exploratory or exploitative innovation ideas does a project of this sort enable? How did the project evolve? What lessons can be learned from this project? A longitudinal case study of Barilla was carried out through two rounds of interviews with marketing, business development and innovation, and digital communication managers. The evidence gathered highlights the emergent evolution of this customer co-creation project from an initial stage of idea exploitation to a more complex and fruitful stage in which both exploitation and exploration were simultaneously accomplished.

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1. The rise of co-creation and the managerial challenge

Firms rarely innovate alone. Innovation represents an interactive relationship between producers, users, and other actors. These two statements characterize our current understanding of the innovation process (Piller, Ihl, & Vossen, 2010). The term 'open innovation' has recently been used to

illustrate a system whereby innovation is not performed solely within a firm but rather is undertaken cooperatively to include external players (Chesbrough, 2003). Based on the idea that customers represent a fundamental source of knowledge for innovation, 'customer co-creation' defines an approach to innovation via which customers take an active part in designing new offerings. [For extended reviews of customers' active role in the innovation process, see Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011.]

The term co-creation is not new, but it is now receiving more attention by both practitioners and scholars. This amplified attention is largely driven by ever-increasing use of the Internet and social media tools as companies endeavor to differentiate

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themselves from competitors. Innovation is even more critical in a context of prolonged economic volatility. Therefore, to help management and organizations improve their innovative capabilities, co-creation and social media for innovation deserve further attention; several questions remain open in these fields, and their possible integration is invoked (Barczak, 2012). Managers face the following practical challenges:

- To what extent can customers be creative?
- What tools and processes enable effective co-creation efforts with customers?
- What strategies are effective in using social media for innovation?
- What types of social media work best for a specific innovation effort (i.e., incremental, really new, or radical)?

This article investigates a customer co-creation project employing front-end innovation (FEI), enabled by social media, in a large Italian food manufacturer, Barilla. From this investigation, we offer practitioners in managerial positions a unique perspective. Managers often focus on choosing the right social media tool to carry out a certain activity. However, the decision is not fixed: the project is a dynamic situation in which the customer, the firm, and the platform mutually interact, thus causing the project to change over time (Martini, Massa, & Testa, 2013). The case of Barilla invites decision makers to focus on what types of ideas—exploitative and/or exploratory—can be gathered with a specific tool and how a project can change over time.

2. Customers, FEI, and social media

The FEI process centers on two essential activities: (1) generating novel concepts and ideas and (2) selecting specific concepts and ideas to be pursued further (O'Hern & Rindfleisch, 2009). Generating ideas is a more open and creative task; thus, it allows a greater degree of freedom than selecting from a predefined set of ideas. A firm's main challenge is how to incentivize users to share their innovative ideas. Some companies promise cash rewards or licensing contracts for innovative ideas, while others build on non-monetary acknowledgments, peer or company recognition, and a pride-of-authorship effect. Companies often provide rewards or recognition only to the best submissions, thus employing a

competitive mechanism to foster and encourage user innovation (Piller & Walcher, 2006). The nature of competition should encourage more or better users to participate, as it should inspire their creativity and increase the quality of submissions.

Literature contributions often refer to idea screening and evaluation as a means for companies to identify and select ideas with the highest potential. Idea-screening methods generally involve customers participating in evaluations while management has the final word. Because the number of ideas has the potential to be very large, the challenge is to find an efficient method for selecting the best ideas. Toubia and Florès (2007) describe several idea-screening algorithms that perform this selection adaptively based on previous consumers' evaluations.

2.1. Customer co-creation and social media

For some time, market researchers have tried to tackle the issue of co-creation by developing focus groups or in-context scenarios (e.g., in home, in shop) that enable them to closely observe consumer behavior. The goal of this observation is to gain a deeper understanding of consumer behavior; however, a number of scholars raise doubts regarding such methods' ability to generate radical innovation. There always seems to be a clear delineation between the roles of researchers, marketers, product/brand developers, and designers and the role of the consumer. In addition to conventional methods, many companies are starting to adopt social media to develop co-creation initiatives (Borghini, Hung Byers, & Chui, 2011). We define 'social media' as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation/exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social media represents a new trend, as it changes the rules of communication with customers by allowing firms to engage in timely and direct end-consumer contact at a relatively low cost and higher efficiency levels than with more traditional communication tools. In the realm of customer co-creation, the use of social media represents a great opportunity for company management. It shortens the distance between the company and users, thereby increasing and strengthening user involvement and engagement in the innovation process (Piller, Vossen, & Ihl, 2012). Indeed, using different contact channels can be a worthwhile and profitable strategy for firms that wish to be active wherever their customers are present, thus becoming part of

Table 1. Evidence sources for the case study

Primary data sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi-structured interviews (October 2010-December 2011) 		
	Informants	#Interviews (1 st & 2 nd round)	Σ Hours
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business Development and Innovation Manager 	3	8
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital Communication Manager Marketing Manager 	3 2	8 6
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal research notes Ongoing discussions Internal documents Balance sheets The company's website 		
Secondary data sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sector description Press releases Previous case studies conducted on the firm 		

their lives. However, few firms are able to act comfortably in a world where consumers can speak so freely with each other and where businesses have increasingly less control over the information available about them (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social media tools now play an important role in transforming the characteristics of FEI, changing its boundaries and knowledge distances, and making it more efficient and effective in certain circumstances (Afuah & Tucci, 2012; Bogers, Afuah, & Bastian, 2010; Jespersen, 2010). Filled with platforms involving 100+ million users (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), social media creates a large virtual ecosystem via which companies and their customers can engage in a common and equal creative effort. As such, online channels like communities, discussion forums, blogs, and virtual worlds hold great promise for the implementation of customer co-creation. Several examples of customer co-creation enabled by social media are reported in the literature (Antorini, Muniz, & Askildsen, 2012). This literature, however, is developmental and just moving from the *what* question to the *how* question.

3. The Barilla customer co-creation project

Consistent with the explorative aim of this work, we carried out a longitudinal case study to investigate contextual specificities. Table 1 reports the sources of evidence for this case study. The company we selected for our study, Barilla, is highly innovative. Every year, it launches approximately 50 new

products and is involved in about 150 projects that see various actors—both inside and outside the company—actively interacting.

Originally established in 1877 as a bread and pasta shop in Parma, Barilla is today one of Italy's top food producers. It is a leader in the pasta business worldwide, in the pasta sauce business across continental Europe, in the bakery product business (which is the focus of this case study) in Italy, and in the crisp bread business in Scandinavia (Figure 1).

Barilla exports to more than 100 countries and employs more than 15,000 people. In 2012, it registered net sales of €3.990 billion; earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortization (EBITDA) of €433 million; and net earnings of €60 million. The company has been managed by one family's entrepreneurial experience for more than 130 years and is currently being run by fourth-generation siblings.

The Mulino Bianco brand was created to launch a new line of oven-baked products in 1975. The concepts of wellness and healthy eating were captured by associations with nature and old-world traditions. The word *mulino* (mill) represents a simple and old-fashioned way of processing wheat products, whereas *bianco* (white) embodies the psychological perceptions of purity, force, and brightness. Despite the fact that White Mill's marketing strategy is imbued with good-old-days values, Barilla is a modern and highly innovative global company with a special focus on social, environmental, and economic sustainability. The company's innovation portfolio, which is constantly revised based on defined priorities, is made up of approximately

Figure 1. The Barilla group



150 projects in different developmental stages that should be finalized within the next 2 to 3 years. In 2010, Barilla invested €42 million in research and development and employed about 250 people in research, technological and product innovation, and quality control (barillagroup.com) groups.

4. The co-creation project's journey

In this section, we analyze Barilla's 'In the Mill I Wish For' initiative (MIW), a customer co-creation project based on a Web 2.0 platform. The case is described using Antonacopoulou and Pesqueux's (2010) dimensions:

- Purposes (intention);
- Place (space, context, cultural and social conditions);
- Principles (values and assumptions);
- Procedures, both formal and informal (rules, resources, and actions); and
- Practitioners.

Given our longitudinal design, we gathered information about the above dimensions from two rounds

of interviews. The first round of interviews, which occurred October through December of 2010 (a year after the project began), provided information about the past characteristics of the project. The second round of interviews took place 1 year later (October through December of 2011) and provided information about the project's current characteristics.

4.1. The purposes

MIW started in 2009 with the following main purposes:

- To gather all brand lovers in an organized online community, leveraging several examples of spontaneous online fan clubs founded around specific White Mill products, such as Pan di Stelle cookies and Soldino snacks—with their cult-like following, despite discontinuation.¹ To capitalize on this presence and overcome online fragmentation, White Mill created Facebook pages for each of its main products and founded MIW to interact directly with customers, thereby transforming the brand-customer relationship from one-to-many to many-to-many. In the digital communication manager's (DC manager) own words:

By bringing together various Pan di Stelle Facebook fan pages, we [built] a house on the web for many Pan di Stelle lovers. Through MIW, we want to create a communication and relationship platform to give all people a voice.

- To obtain feedback on White Mill initiatives and glean new insights, as well as to gather ideas from the online community. Via this platform, customers can submit new ideas specifically related to a White Mill business area. Other users can subsequently vote on these ideas; the White Mill marketing department then considers winning ideas for implementation.

The DC manager spoke of recruiting people to engage in a new relationship with the brand. To drive engagement, the company nurtures and celebrates content and ideas from the community. For example, those who provide ideas that the company chooses to implement are the focus of a celebration day during which the idea is presented as part of a big media event. Regarding the kind of

¹ The Facebook page titled 'Give Us Soldino Back' had 22,212 subscribers in 2013, and Pan di Stelle fans numbered 1,721,533.

insights the company expects from MIW, the DC manager admitted the following in the first round of interviews:

We don't expect breakthrough ideas from our customers online. MIW represents more of an innovation in communication than a tool for involving consumers in innovation. We receive precious insights by listening to our customers, but these insights are necessarily incremental in nature. We pursue radical innovation by activating completely different search practices, going far from our business and from what we know. Crowdsourcing is not useful when you have scarce information and do not have a clear idea of what you are looking for.

4.2. The place

MIW is an online consumer portal via which White Mill customers can share ideas and suggestions about various issues such as the company's products, promotions, initiatives, and social and environmental commitment. MIW takes the concept of crowdsourcing and opens it to any customer upon registration. It also integrates and cross-promotes White Mill's web presence, which was derived from disorganized, organically grown initiatives. In addition, MIW has a Facebook account for customers who prefer that channel of communication. MIW is linked bi-directionally to the institutional brand's webpage.

MIW includes a blog published in Really Simple Syndication (RSS) format. In this blog, different White Mill employees write about and discuss newly implemented projects or launched products, as well as how customer ideas or suggestions are handled. Customer comments must follow accepted Internet etiquette (networketiquette.net), which makes up the guidelines used for all communication enabled on MIW. As a result, the company may intervene when the accepted rules are not followed, as cutting off 'flame wars' is a priority.

4.3. The principles

According to the DC manager, there are three main principles driving MIW:

Firstly, MIW is not supposed to be an institutional company website and certainly not a brochure website. Indeed, it does not talk to customers; on the contrary, it listens. Secondly, its aim is not to teach but to learn. Thirdly, it is an operational platform aimed at promoting actions more than talk.

These principles are clearly stated on MIW's homepage with the slogan "What matters here is your voice." Regarding the platform's operational nature, the DC manager explained:

MIW is not about explaining why our products are better than others; rather, it is about engaging customers in open and active conversation, finding out what they might find interesting and enjoyable. In fact, a key element in the success of this initiative is fostering customer participation leveraging the so-called intrinsic motivation of community members, which has more to do with obtaining a reward from the activity itself than with its actual outcome.

There is a fourth basic principle that frames the entire project: maintaining genuine and sincere interaction with customers. These guiding principles were defined at the beginning of the project and represent the pillars of this entire initiative. The MIW homepage reads, "Tell us everything and don't worry. We aren't prejudiced. We are ready to get in the game and listen to all your suggestions, including any which may not seem to fit our current business."

4.4. The procedures

We identified two types of procedures at White Mill: front-end and backstage. The former defines how the company collects information and ideas from customers; the latter defines how White Mill employees manage such information and ideas.

Front-end procedures require users to create an account in order to submit an idea or comment and vote on others' ideas. Upon registration, users have the option of searching for ideas or directly submitting their own. Ideas are collected methodically according to areas (e.g., products, promotions, packaging, environment, social issues) and thematic fields (e.g., new ingredients, new recipes, new products). The community then votes on ideas and White Mill marketing staff consider the highest-ranking (top 10) for implementation. A tutor is available to help users in this process. The tutor provides suggestions on how to make ideas clearer and increase participants' chances of being chosen by the community; however, the tutor does not make any judgments regarding the quality of ideas. The tutor can also open new discussion threads and delete inappropriate posts to safeguard the company's reputation.

Initially in back-stage procedures, only ideas selected by community members were entered into the evaluation and feasibility process. This was based on the assumption that decision makers do

not have time to wade through thousands of ideas. At a later stage, ideas identified by the marketing staff also entered into evaluations, thus introducing a new top-down procedure of direct idea selection. With this procedure, called search-examine-find, each brand manager can choose an idea regardless of its success in the community. This procedure aims at limiting the online community's conservative attitude, which will be described in a following section.

In order to guarantee the company's full engagement with MIW at all levels, three types of procedures were set in place: weekly review meetings involving directors, the business development and innovation unit, and the digital communication unit; a monthly newsletter sent to the business development and innovation unit, the marketing research unit, and trade; and periodical reviews involving the whole company.

4.5. The practitioners

Practitioners involved in MIW fall into two main categories: external and internal users. External users interact with the application from outside the company, while internal users use the platform at several levels from inside the company. Interaction is naturally between customers and the brand, and is understood as only mediated by the platform.

Although participation is open to all, external users are mainly White Mill customers and brand lovers. Based on participation data after 1 year of activity, 27% of external users are men, 73% are women, and the average age is 35.

At the first round of interviews, internal users were initially members of the digital communication unit who had designed and implemented the application. An idea was submitted to the relevant brand manager for evaluation only after it had been selected by external users (through online voting) and examined by the digital communication unit. Systematic internal users were digital communication employees with various functions: tracing selected ideas by informing external users on work in progress, running the blogs, monitoring correct use of the application, examining ideas with the most votes, and randomly analyzing ideas that had been discarded by the community, among other functions.

At the second round of interviews, a change in internal users emerged. Due to newly implemented procedures (i.e., search-examine-find and polls on specific issues), brand managers and the marketing unit were stimulated to interact directly with the tool and use it to look for new ideas on specific themes of interest.

4.6. First results: Nostalgia takes over

MIW's first year of activity recorded approximately 4,120 ideas. Based on votes received, two ideas were implemented in 2010, a third in 2011, and a fourth in 2013. The community seems to be driven by people who strive to re-create the past by proposing re-editions of old products, old packaging, and old gadgets, which perhaps remind them of their childhood. Several White Mill products have been on the market since the mid-1970s, and the average age of the MIW user is 35 years old. Thus, the majority of community members were children in that decade. Having these same users vote on their favorite ideas seems to have a conservative effect that essentially cuts off potentially more innovative ideas. However, White Mill caters to the community's 'former children' who demonstrate genuine devotion to the brand by re-proposing old products and packaging in limited editions. The first two ideas to receive numerous votes and then be implemented in 2010 called for the re-edition of discontinued products, specifically Soldino (a pastry glazed with chocolate and a small chocolate coin—literally, *soldino*—on the top) and Palicao (a cocoa cookie that melts in milk). For example, in the case of Soldino, the person who submitted the idea clearly addressed the "former children of the snack-and-cartoon generation," as she defined her peers:

So, as nostalgic clamor for Soldino, why don't you make it with a Euro on it? It's proof that White Mill is a certainty that has accompanied us since we were children until now that we are parents. Everything goes away, but White Mill is still here!

This idea received 6,696 votes and was the first idea selected for implementation by the firm. The post asking for Palicao to return to the shelves sounded more like a prayer:

Please, I beg you! Do your best to make Palicao come back in the Olympus of White Mill productions! Many children of yesterday and today would be grateful to you! It's a shame they were taken off the market. They were simply wonderful!

This idea received 7,500 votes, and White Mill put Palicao and Soldino on sale again as limited editions. Recent posts lament the temporariness and call for Palicao and Soldino to come back permanently: "In the mill I wish for, there is the free market of Palicao."

Nostalgic feelings for the old days have also emerged in several posts asking for re-editions of

old products, gadgets, and commercials. Having gained more than 1,000 votes so far, one idea represents this type of nostalgia quite well: the request for a virtual time machine that would bring the consumer back to his childhood. The firm considers it to be one of the funniest ideas received thus far. Indeed, the user's personal avatar seems to be a childhood picture of himself. In his post, he proposed a virtual game whereby the user could find old gadgets to exchange with former childhood friends and a TV channel that would broadcast old commercials. White Mill takes such nostalgia seriously and gratifies it by means of ad hoc initiatives, albeit without distorting the present brand. For example, the company recently activated a blog that is entirely dedicated to its gadgets; it is run by a person who has been dealing with White Mill gadgets and promotions since 1978.

4.7. Exploitative ideas first, but explorative ideas are emerging

In this first phase, the exploitative nature of this co-creation project clearly prevailed. However, despite the generally conservative nature of the MIW online community, some non-traditional ideas have been proposed. These ideas are not as popular within the community, but the marketing unit has selected several of them for implementation. In the spring of 2009, for example, two users proposed that White Mill support World Wildlife Fund (WWF) sites in Italy. According to the marketing manager:

The entire White Mill team liked this idea so much that we decided to implement it even though it was not one of the top 10 most-voted ideas. We contacted WWF to figure out how we could work together to support WWF sites in Italy.

Three successful Facebook projects sprang from this idea. One project, Tree Count, committed to planting one tree for every 10 users who voted online for their favorite White Mill product in the 'Fruit Histories' line (milkshakes and fruit cups). Only a week after launch, 2,500 users had voted and 250 trees had correspondingly been planted in WWF sites. After 20 days, the final target of planting a whole orchard had been reached, and the competition now continues with new initiatives.

The DC manager initially interpreted this as a signal of MIW's innovative potential that needs to be empowered through new procedures and new professional roles. A year after the project began, our second interview with the DC manager revealed that MIW's explorative potential of co-creation is now

emerging. When asked if MIW also had an explorative purpose, the DC manager responded:

Of course breakthrough ideas come out of MIW. How else would you define the idea of a White Mill-themed amusement park? I don't know if it will be carried out, but it is surely a mold-breaking idea!

5. Project evolution

Some characteristics of the MIW co-creation project (see Table 2), such as place and principles, have remained the same over time; others—including purpose, procedures, and practitioners—have changed. Such changes (e.g., an extension of the platform's former purposes, the introduction of new procedures, the inclusion of new categories of practitioners) have promoted the MIW project's ability to generate both radically and incrementally innovative ideas.

However unexpected it may have been, the explorative potential of MIW did emerge. Company management may not have recognized this potential a priori because the tool had been designed to involve customers and brand lovers: a narrowly defined community. MIW had been conceived for a 'near search' and was not expected to find anything 'distant'—that is to say, a radically new idea. This explorative capability of the tool is connected to features of social media that can extend the potentiality of near search to address an online community that is virtually infinite (Afuah & Tucci, 2012). The critical aspect lies in putting procedures in place to select innovative contributions, as well as to find practitioners inside the company who are able to understand the potential innovativeness behind these ideas. This change mainly involves backstage procedures, with the double aim of limiting the online community's conservative attitude (the search-examine-find procedure) and increasing the whole company's commitment. To accomplish these goals, the company decided to dedicate more specialized employees, such as those working in the business development and innovation unit. New employees were also hired in the digital communication unit, which went from two to seven employees. In the first phase, the DC manager acted as a sort of idea-router, occasionally involving the respective brand manager, the marketing manager, or the business development and innovation manager. In the second phase, use of the new search-examine-find procedure and launch of specific polls prompted brand managers

Table 2. From past to present

	Past	Present
Purposes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an organized community online • Create a platform for communication and relationships • Maintain and strengthen the community over time • Obtain feedback on WM initiatives from the community • Get new insights from the community • Get incrementally new ideas from the community 	The same plus getting radically new ideas from the community
Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web 2.0 consumer portal • Facebook account • Bi-directional connection to the company website • RSS feed of MIW blog 	No change
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MIW does not talk to customers; it listens • MIW does not teach; it learns • MIW is an operative platform • MIW aims at maintaining genuine and sincere interaction with customers 	No change
Procedures	Registration and searching/submitting/voting on ideas; the ideas that receive the most votes from the community are entered into the evaluation and feasibility process	The same, plus the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A tutor to help customers submit ideas • Quantitative/qualitative polls by brand managers • Sample stratification of the population that participates in the polls • Free products in reward for participation in the polls • Search-examine-find • Weekly review involving brand managers, BD&I managers, and DC managers • Monthly newsletter to BD&I, MKT, MRU, & trade • Periodical reviews involving the whole company
Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WM customers • DC employees 	The same, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand Managers • BD&I

Legend: BD&I = Business Development and Innovation; MKT = Marketing; MRU = Marketing Research Unit; DC = Digital Communication; WM = White Mill.

and the marketing unit to interact directly with the tool and use it to look for new ideas on specific themes of interest. Indeed, White Mill management learned that selected managers and experts in specific fields are the best individuals to usefully interact with customers and identify radically innovative ideas through this interaction. White Mill decision makers learned the importance of closely following the project's evolution and acting accordingly. They realized the need to introduce new procedures to expand the whole company's commitment and carefully select an appropriate group of employees to interact directly with customers.

As our empirical evidence shows, the project was able to gather both incremental and radical

innovation ideas concurrently. This aspect emerged over time as an unexpected outcome; managers were initially rather skeptical about MIW's innovative potential. This attitude may have resulted from the difficulties managers often have in understanding the nature of and motivations behind users that feed social media systems. Managers need to learn to deal with situations in which resources, expertise, and employees are not assigned or preset by formal authorities in an organization. These resources can be people 'out there' who are attracted to providing suggestions regarding existing or new products. They feel attached to this task because of self-interest, a challenge matching their expertise, or an intrinsic reward in completing it.

The belief that these resources are free (but not necessarily less valid) represents a large internal cultural change that can be brought about by increasing the entire company's involvement. In fact, over time, there was an increase in the entire firm's involvement and in the human and financial resources dedicated to the MIW project. Specifically, the process of idea selection greatly improved over time. Ideas are now compared, grouped, and discussed on the blog, a process that has become increasingly central to the firm. Soon after its start, users were allowed to add comments to the firm's posts on the blog. During the first year of activity (2009), the average number of comments per post was 12. In 5 years' time (2013), the average number of comments per post nearly quadrupled (46). The tone of communication has also become more informal and peer-to-peer focused. Each idea that undergoes evaluation and is subsequently implemented or rejected is discussed by the MIW team in the idea's diary: a subset of the blog entirely dedicated to the evolution of each idea selected for evaluation. The team members explain why they appreciated and selected the idea. If it is eventually implemented, they discuss how it was carried out. Otherwise, they discuss the reasons for its rejection. Through the diary, the team frequently groups several ideas together and provides a solution that is intended to merge input from several users. For example, White Mill launched a new kind of whole wheat croissant with cane sugar in May 2013. This was to satisfy the needs of three users who proposed similar ideas that received numerous votes: "whole wheat croissant with honey" (2009), "new flavors for croissants" (2012), "croissant with pearl cane sugar" (2013).

As mentioned, communication improved over time by becoming richer and more continuous, thus allowing for an increase in the alignment of top ideas and in the number of ideas realized. For example, as the number of realized ideas increased steadily from 2009 to 2013 (going from two realized ideas in 2010 to eight so far in 2013), the firm has significantly reduced direct idea selection (search-examine-find). In fact, in the first 2 years of the project (2010–2011), the company selected half of the implemented ideas (three out of six) directly, while in 2012–2013, the company only selected one idea out of 14 realized; the other 13 were the top voted.

In addition, the company's approach has become smoother. Instead of directly selecting the best ideas for the company and thus bypassing the voting procedure, the marketing staff has now become accustomed to discussing the top-voted ideas that enter the evaluation procedure by

means of the idea diary. During this discussion, which can go on for a long time (even years as in the following example), the original idea is progressively transformed into a proposal that matches the company's needs. For example, the idea proposed in February 2009 of a theme park intended as "a true mill that could become an amusement park with carousels made of giant White Mill products, bumper cars with giant cups, and a snack-shaped rollercoaster" entered into evaluation in August of the same year. This idea received a lot of votes and was considered a breakthrough by the company, as the DC manager reported above. Notwithstanding, this idea is difficult to realize and has now been under evaluation for nearly 5 years. It has lost its fantasy traits and has become a more feasible project combining playful and educational aspects. As the marketing manager explained in the idea diary:

Even though we had found a partner with whom we could realize the theme park and had started to evaluate a concrete project, we decided not to carry it forward. In fact, we believe that all projects involving and engaging children should add educational goals to playful aspects in terms of promoting nutrition (against eating disorders and in favor of simple, high-quality ingredients) and healthier lifestyles (more exercise, outdoor activities, and so on).

They have now launched a call to find the right place to host such an ambitious project. The perfect location should meet some basic requirements. It should be in a natural setting and ideally have a mill—even if it does not work—next to a source of water, it should have a large outdoor area where several nature-related and entertainment activities could be held, and it should be easily accessible to everyone. This call has been open since April 2011, and any good ideas are welcome!

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