

“Authentic marketing is not the art of selling what you make but knowing what to make” – Philip Kotler

On the way to work, I often spend my time in the morning reading newspapers and drinking coffee. From time to time, I have to place my cup in the cup holder so I can also check emails. One day, I asked myself if my car didn't have the cup holder, how I could continue to enjoy my coffee and my work at the same time when I am on the road.

I think if we asked car shoppers a decade ago what features they were looking for in their new car, cup holders wouldn't cross anyone's mind at that time. However, car cup holder has now become the feature new car owners want to be without. It has now been considered to be so essential that many customers wonder why it took so long to arrive.

I searched the internet and found an online survey conducted by an American website saying that nearly 30% of car shoppers nowadays would be willing to look for an altogether different make or model of vehicle to find the perfect cup holders. I didn't investigate further on who was the first one who created this feature but I must give that person a thumb-up for such a brilliant idea as it shows how much he understood the customer needs and the consumer trends.

While many people consider the design and number of cup holders in a car to be one of the most important attributes influencing their car purchase, other think the feature is irrelevant and encourages a dangerous practice which distracts drivers from their primary task.

But taking marketing and innovation into account, I would say car cup holder is a good example of how businesses should be done in the today's competitive world. As Philip Kotler put it “marketing is not the art of selling what you make but knowing what to make”.

And those who succeed are the ones who have deep understanding of the customer needs.

When talk about meeting customer needs, I think many companies get caught in the trap of soliciting customer feedback with the intention of improving the functionality of the existing products. This approach might work well in the past when competition wasn't so intensify.

However, today, every company conducts the same feedback surveys either by their own marketing team or by outsourced research consultants. Consequently, we end up with the same findings and at best we can improve the product functionality a little bit better but we all still confine ourselves in the same old market, instead of stepping out to explore the untapped new markets. Yet all marketers need to step back and genuinely understand the customer needs so they may become customer centric rather than product centric.

The companies that can create a new market are those who genuinely understand customers and can apply such knowledge to build a new product or service that answers those needs even before the customers themselves have articulated such needs. This marketing approach will not only open up a new business opportunity but also a totally new market demand. They may not be direct competition right now but could well be in the future. I used the word 'future' because existing customers today may not know what they need until the product is available in the market. But that's our job to really study customer behaviors and their lifestyles in order to understand their unarticulated needs and design a new product to answer these needs.

Car cup holder is built from a keen understanding of today's lifestyles which see rising popularity of coffee and longer hours consumers spend on the road. I don't think anyone knew that they needed to have this feature in their cars until it arrived. Today, it has become an indispensable car feature that leading car companies have to pay more attention to. Sony Walkman is another good example of innovative product that created a new market based on the deep understanding of customer behaviors and the imagination of the company's management that wanted to see a new device that allowed ordinary people to listen to their favorite songs without having to walk on the beach with a radio on their shoulders.

On the launch date, some people claimed that nobody would be interested in a tape player without a record function. However, a month after the Walkman became available in Japanese stores, it was sold out. The device was popular amongst all consumers, not just teenagers, because it answered their needs to have an audio player that let them listen to their songs without disturbing others around them. Again, this need maybe hidden somewhere in their minds and they themselves might not know of its existence until Sony introduced the product into the market. Every industry still has a room for growth but we must create new market demands instead of sticking in the same area where space is getting smaller or already fully occupied.

I think new ideas maybe floating around, waiting for someone to put them together and shape them up into something new.