

Newsletter

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Getting the customer involved already in the early stage of planning

The participants in the futures seminar were unanimous about the importance of hearing their customers' and consumers' opinions. There was, however, some uncertainty as to how this could be done and how to identify the customer. A Forest Foresight Unit survey into higher education revealed that paper technology education has based its educational vision on the forest sector research strategy, while wood technology and forestry education still lack a strong trend-setter.

Consumer decisions increasingly observe ecological aspects

Customer needs and problems as a starting point

An educational vision to lead the way

Low appeal is the most acute problem

Consumer decisions increasingly observe ecological aspects

In February, the Forest Foresight Unit organised a futures seminar to think about the meaning of customer and user orientation in the forest and forest energy sector. The discussions underscored the importance of taking customers and end users into consideration in the operations of enterprises and public organisations alike. It is, however, still difficult to find examples of successful and customer-oriented development activities from within the forest sector.

The topic was addressed from three different viewpoints. Dr Anu Raijas from the National Consumer Research Centre shed light on the general trends of consuming. Ecological aspects and ethicality are estimated to assume an increasingly strong role as values among Western consumers, although this is also a generation issue. According to Dr Raijas, young people already consider ecological aspects when making their consumer decisions. She believes that the following generations in particular will consider the carbon footprint of wood products, energy and paper a significant competition factor.

The life cycle of wood products was believed to affect decisions pertaining to construction through public opinion, land use planning choices, and decisions of building developers and constructors. However, consumers' decision-making should be supported by increasing their awareness of research results on wood as an ecological construction material.

Customer needs and problems as a starting point

Project Manager, Ms Ulla Rätty from the North Karelia University of Applied Sciences, proposed that the customer should be involved in the planning of products and services alongside with technical, design and business experts already in the early stage of the process. If the product first meets its customers in the piloting or launching stage, required changes are expensive and time-consuming to execute.

The participants agreed that customer-orientation was all about finding solutions to customer problems and customer needs. But who is the customer? It was especially difficult to identify the customers of ecosystem services.

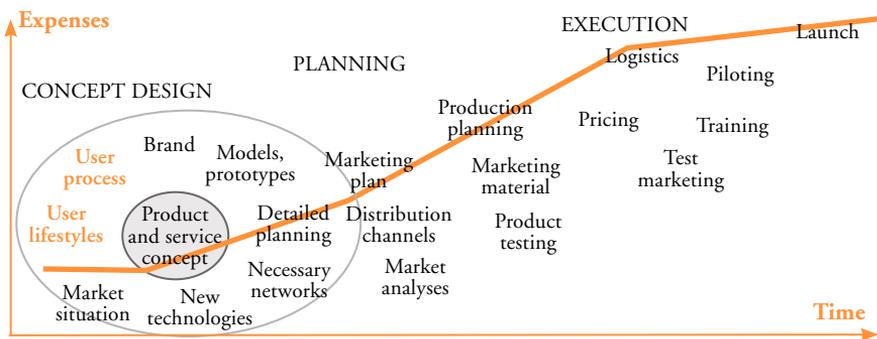


Figure 1. Anticipatory and customer-oriented innovation activities are profitable and minimize the risks, as the products and services are designed to meet the end user needs, interests and experiences already at the early stage of the process. (Source: D'ART Design Resource Centre, Mirja Kälviäinen).

The customer was seen as the one paying the bill, however; the customer using non-monetary services may in fact be the entire society through the Government paying its citizens' bill.

Product and service providers are often expected to identify the needs of their customers: they need to find solutions for their customers in order for them to be able to serve theirs'. For instance, the wood products industry serves building developers who, in turn, serve consumers.

The participation of the customer in product planning does involve going outside the usual comfort zone, Project Manager, Mr Matti Kuronen of YIT admits. This being said, YIT nevertheless intends to continue the development of customer-oriented housing. According to Mr Kuronen, customer participation should become part of the normal product development process and it should be seen as a critical success factor.

An educational vision to lead the way

The Ministry of Education has requested the Forest Foresight Unit to conduct a survey into how the universities and universities of applied sciences offering forestry, wood technology and paper technology education* in eastern and south-eastern Finland could meet the future needs. The survey recommends various alternatives for the educational institutions to create their distinct profiles and to develop their division of responsibility.

The survey indicates that re-targeting the training provision is difficult to carry out in practice as many of the institutions lack an educational vision. The on-going reform of the forest sector production structure is also causing uncertainty on the future needs of expertise. Paper technology education makes an exception to the above, as its fields of expertise are expanded to support the development and production of new products and businesses, as emphasised in the research strategy of the forest cluster.

The development of expertise structures in the wood products cluster has been hindered

by a lack of an attractive business, operator or development programme. The new research strategy for the wood products cluster could provide wood technology education with a new direction, but without substantial funding, its role may remain insignificant. The forestry education institutions do not regard the National Forest Programme as a strategy paving the way for their future operations.

Low appeal is the most acute problem

The most acute problem for all educational institutions offering forestry, wood technology and paper technology education is the low appeal of the education. The number of applicants in relation to the student intakes has been decreasing, crashing even if you will, in all degree programmes since the year 2006. The low number of applicants is reflected in applicant quality, the number of drop-outs, and the prestige of the degree programme within the institution in question. The danger is that these sectors will be dealing with a shortage of skilled labour force.

The problem of low appeal is the most tangible in universities of applied sciences offering wood technology education. Indeed, doubling the number of wood technology engineers was set as a goal in the so-called Paajanen report (2008) of the Ministry of Education. The actual trend, however, is quite contrary. According to the current plans, the degree programme in wood technology will in 2010 continue as an independent programme only in three universities of applied sciences in Finland.

The representatives of the educational institutions hoped that the industry and the Ministry of Education would engage in an extensive campaign in collaboration with the educational institutions to improve the appeal of the education and to promote the image of the sector. That alone is not enough: The forest sector and forestry education need to renew themselves in order to send out a credible message of a field that is dynamic and innovative.

Publication:

The final report of the working group on 'Pulp and Paper' of the Forest Technology Platform's Education and Training Group (ETG)
www.forestplatform.org/index.php?mid=55&a=show&id=167

* Forestry: University of Joensuu, Faculty of Forest Sciences; Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences, Degree Programme in Forestry; Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences, Degree Programme in Forestry and Forest and Wood Products Marketing; North Karelia University of Applied Sciences, Degree Programme in Forestry. Wood technology: Lappeenranta University of Technology, Wood Technology; Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Degree Programme in Wood Technology; Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences, Degree Programme in Wood Technology. Paper technology: Lappeenranta University of Technology, Majors in Sustainable Process Engineering, Fibre and Paper Technology and Applied Chemistry; Saimaan University of Applied Sciences, Degree Programme in Paper Technology.

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