Business Horizons (2016) xxx, xxx—xxx

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
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Crowdsourcing in a time of empowered stakeholders: Lessons from crowdsourcing campaigns

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KEYWORDS
Crowdsourcing;
Crowdfunding;
Creative consumer;
Consumer backlash;
Crowdthink;
Crowd hijacking

Abstract Crowdsourcing can test a company's willingness to relinquish control to key stakeholders. Using past examples of four failed crowdsourcing initiatives, we explore the negative and unintended consequences of crowdsourcing in an age when stakeholders are empowered to speak their minds, make a mockery of organizational initiatives, and direct initiatives as it suits their own agenda. The concepts of crowdthink and crowd hijacking are introduced, and advice is given on how managers can avoid or anticipate some of the potential issues that arise during crowdsourcing endeavors. With these considerations, managers can harness the power of crowds effectively to achieve organizational goals with limited negative consequences.
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1. The rise of crowdsourcing

Since Howe introduced the concept of crowdsourcing to academic literature in 2006, scholars and practitioners have become increasingly interested in the phenomenon. Howe's (2006) definition of crowdsourcing has since been updated to refer to "the use of IT to outsource any organizational function to a strategically defined population of human and non-human actors in the form of an open call" (Kietzmann, 2017, p. 3). This practice can be successful in business contexts largely because tapping into a crowd allows organizations to benefit from a large number of people who bring diversity in ideas, knowledge, and experience, which is leveraged to the benefit of the organization (Erickson, Petrick, & Trauth, 2012). Examples of successful crowdsourcing initiatives abound, including Glassdoor (Dabirian, Kietzmann, & Diba, 2017), Pebble, Firstbuild, and Shock Top (Brown, Boon, & Pitt, 2017). The idea behind crowdsourcing is not new; in fact, it dates back to 4th century B.C. when Aristotle

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.11.009

discussed the benefits of turning to 'the wisdom of the many' when solving complex problems (Lord, 2013). Today, new terms have been developed to describe the value that emerges from large groups in a crowdsourcing context, including 'collective intelligence' (Lévy, 1997) and 'crowd capital' (Prpić, Shukla, Kietzmann, & McCarthy, 2015). Indeed, crowdsourcing has tremendous promise in business applications, many of which have already emerged or are beginning to emerge in both practice and scholarly research.

Despite the tremendous potential of crowdsourcing campaigns, crowdsourcing is not a silver bullet. Consider the recent Name Our Ship campaign launched by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) in the U.K. The group's newly-commissioned $290 million research vessel is set to sail on a prestigious scientific mission in 2019, during which it will collect data from some of the most remote regions of the world in hopes of securing Britain as a world leader in marine and climate change science. To help instill pride in the new ship, the NERC reached out to all Brits by asking them to contribute name ideas in the form of 'RSS [Name].' In its initial press release, NERC included criteria for the type of name it was looking for and commenced voting by suggesting a few regal names, such as Falcon and Endeavour. However, the four most popular names in terms of user votes were: (1) RRS Boaty McBoatface, (2) RRS Henry Worsley, (3) RRS David Attenborough, and (4) RRS It's Bloody Cold Here.[1] In fact, the suggestion RRS Boaty McBoatface received 10 times more votes than the next-closest name and was the runaway winner when the month-long campaign finished. The name also inspired other humorous suggestions, including RRS Big Metal Floaty Thingy-Thing and RRS I Like Big Boats and I Cannot Lie.

The popularity of the name suggestion RRS Boaty McBoatface generated so much international buzz that the NERC voting website was temporarily shut down due to unexpectedly high traffic. During the campaign, NERC announced that the poll was intended to solicit suggestions and that the final decision lay with the council. They have since announced that the selected name of the vessel is the RRS Sir David Attenborough, and "the name Boaty McBoatface will live on as the name of the ship's high-tech remotely operated sub-sea vehicle."[1]

The story of RRS Boaty McBoatface is not unique. As we discuss in this article, there are numerous other examples in which crowdsourcing backfires, fails, or is not taken seriously by members of the crowd. However, as Cicero stated: "We must not say every mistake is a foolish one." The unintended consequences of failed crowdsourcing initiatives provide managers with key lessons and unique insight into their market. To that end, we present a series of cases to illustrate and explain how and why crowd-based initiatives can go wrong.

In this article, we first define and explain the concept and practices of crowdsourcing. Then, we provide extended examples of unsuccessful crowd-based endeavors. From these examples, we extract a series of takeaways for managers who wish to harness the power of crowds to achieve organizational goals; specifically, we explain a number of considerations as to crowd construction in order to generate crowd capital (Prpić et al., 2015). Finally, we add to the literature by explaining and illustrating some of the pitfalls of crowd-based initiatives and provide suggestions for managers on how to avoid these.

2. Crowdsourcing: Theory and practice

Crowdsourcing emerged in literature when Howe (2006) recommended taking a function typically performed by employees and outsourcing it to everyday people. Recent attention on crowdsourcing is not surprising. It has had huge success in the following areas:

- Organizational functions, such as new product development (Poetz & Schreier, 2012) and advertising (Brabham, 2008);
- Contexts such as disaster relief (Zook, Graham, Shelton, & Gorman, 2010), healthcare (Brabham, Ribisl, Kirchner, & Bernhardt, 2014), and retail (Brabham, 2010);
- Small individual entrepreneurship (e.g., crowdfunding) and large organizations (e.g., Amazon's MTurk); and
- Both online and offline settings (Prpić et al., 2015).

Indeed, the list of applications and contexts for crowdsourcing goes on. Crowdsourcing has proven to be an exciting new development for a wide range of organizations and individuals around the world.

There are four types of crowdsourcing, which can be identified based on two key dimensions: what type of contribution members of the crowd

[1] See https://nameourship.nerc.ac.uk

make and how the organization will process these contributions (Prpić et al., 2015). The first of these dimensions—the type of contribution—links to whether contributions can lead to an objectively correct solution or whether the value of the contribution is subjective in nature. The second of these dimensions relates to whether the organization must filter the contributions in order to determine the most valuable contributions, or whether simply aggregating the contributions will create value and lead to the best solution. These two dimensions lead to four types of crowdsourcing activities: crowd voting (aggregated, subjective), microtask crowdsourcing (aggregated, objective), idea crowdsourcing (filtered, subjective), and solution crowdsourcing (filtered, objective).

In this article, we focus on idea crowdsourcing and crowd voting for two key reasons. First, although objective types of crowdsourcing (i.e., microtask crowdsourcing and solution crowdsourcing) may fail to find solutions or contributions that fit the organizational goals, they are less likely to lead to subjective interpretations that the organization finds neither welcome nor valuable. Moreover, objective solutions can be falsified or tested to determine "whether and to what degree the contribution actually solves the business problem" (Prpić et al., 2015, p. 80). As such, we argue that when a 'wrong answer' is submitted for an objective crowdsourcing task, the manager of this crowdsourcing initiative can simply remove that possible answer and continue searching for one that solves the problem at hand. However, when the contributions from the crowd are subjective, the opportunity is presented for the crowd to have a 'mind of its own' which leads the initiative in directions possibly unwanted or unintended by the organization.

Second, while recent research has already begun to explore the dark side of some forms of objective crowdsourcing initiatives, research on the dark side of subjective crowdsourcing initiatives has not yet emerged in literature. For example, researchers have begun to look at the dark side of some forms of microtask crowdsourcing—specifically crowdfunding. Baucus and Mitteness (2016) published on the topic of *crowdfrauding*, or the issue of Ponzi schemes in crowdfunding situations. Similarly, Robock (2014) cautions that crowdfunding can be a means through which to launder money and Bradford (2012) notes that crowdfunding has a number of potential risks, including the possibility that the project is a scam, that funds will be misused, or the project will simply fail for other reasons. Overall, we aim to shed light on what our emerging research suggests: that there is indeed a dark side to crowdsourcing of subjective tasks.

3. Crowdsourcing failures: Four examples

It is a common belief that managers can learn more from failures than from success. In this same vein, we provide four examples of crowdsourcing campaigns that did not achieve organizational goals. The first two are examples of idea crowdsourcing and the second two are examples of crowd voting. In the first example, we present a failed Chevy Tahoe campaign intended to solicit ideas for a new advertisement from a crowd. The second example is a crowdsourcing venture from the Obama administration in which the questions received from the public did not have the desired outcome. The third and fourth examples are both crowd voting campaigns that ended in undesirable outcomes, one led by the New York Mets and the other by the National Hockey League (NHL). These examples were chosen based on their diversity—they represent crowdsourcing initiatives in advertising of vehicles, in politics, as well as in sports and entertainment. These examples each illustrate a different crowdsourcing context and goal, and each illustrate unique challenges faced by those in charge of these crowd-based initiatives. Managers developing or considering crowd-based initiatives in their organizations can learn from these extended examples.

3.1. Idea crowdsourcing gone amiss

3.1.1. The Chevy Tahoe

The Chevy Tahoe was the most popular full-size sport utility vehicle in America in 2005, with over 150,000 units sold (Cain, 2014). After years without major upgrades, the Tahoe underwent a makeover and in March 2006 the Chevrolet marketing team devised an online contest to promote its relaunch. In an effort to live up to Chevy's tagline (An American Revolution), the team wanted to take advantage of a new marketing tactic—crowdsourcing user-generated content. Contestants were invited to develop 30-second web video advertisements that showcased the Tahoe's new features. To encourage submissions, Chevy created a dedicated microsite, Chevyapprentice.com, that housed a simple video editing tool as well as music and video clips provided by the company. Users had the ability to edit the material and add their own captions, and were then encouraged to share the videos on YouTube and other social media platforms.

The response from users was impressive; more than 30,000 entries were submitted during the four-week contest. Most of the user-created videos communicated the positive aspects of the Tahoe such as

its retractable seats and new styling. But almost immediately, negatively themed videos appeared on the site disparaging the vehicle's impact on the environment. Empowered and environmentally conscious consumers seized on the opportunity to criticize the Tahoe for its poor fuel economy and contribution to global warming, and also mocked drivers for the psychosexual subtext associated with large cars. A number of the consumer submissions included references to melting polar ice caps, the Iraq war, and the religious affiliations of drivers. Users titled their videos 'Enjoy the Longer Summers,' 'Glacier Melt,' and 'Tahoe for the Executive Branch,' alluding to President George W. Bush and his cabinet.

Contrary to what many expected, Chevy did not remove the negative videos from the site, claiming the company would lose credibility if it were to do so (Rose, 2006). And although the experiment may have seemed like a public relations nightmare, Chevy insisted that it had anticipated some negative responses all along. In the end, many considered the campaign a success as it attracted 629,000 visitors to the microsite and sales of the Tahoe soared.

3.1.2. The Obama Administration

Shortly after taking office in 2009, President Obama's administration launched a forum called Open for Questions on the White House website. Following through on a campaign promise, the intent of the forum was to encourage participation from the electorate in an open and transparent manner. Through the forum, people were able to submit questions and topics they wanted addressed and then vote on which issues should be prioritized (Kamensky, 2010). In theory, the forum was a microcosm of democracy itself, allowing everyday voters to voice their opinion with the most popular, and therefore most important, issues being addressed.

In practice, it did not take long for a special interest group to flood the site with questions relating to their cause. The National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) urged and empowered its members to submit and vote for questions related to the decriminalization of marijuana (Armentano, 2009). NORML posted a plea to its website: "Help us send the White House a message our elected leaders can't ignore." NORML supporters and other marijuana enthusiasts heeded the call. In almost all categories, marijuana-related topics dominated; the top four questions under headings about financial security and budget were about marijuana regulation, as was the second most popular question under the healthcare reform category (Anderson, 2009). Even the green jobs and energy category contained marijuana-related questions at the top.

Despite NORML's success in getting its issues to the top of the list, marijuana regulation was not the focus of the virtual town hall meeting. After addressing other lower-ranked questions, President Obama acknowledged that the topic of marijuana had received a lot of attention and delivered a brief response that we suspect was unsatisfactory to NORML and others. This example demonstrates the power online crowds can exert in an attempt to have their voices heard. In the years since Open for Questions debuted, the online forum has evolved and has been renamed Engage and Connect. While the public can still submit comments and questions to the White House, there is no mechanism for people to view or vote on submissions, and the eventual questions that reach the President's desk are vetted by his administration.

3.2. Crowd voting gone amiss

3.2.1. The New York Mets

The tradition is as old as the game itself; during the seventh inning of a baseball game, fans stand to sing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" and other sing-along songs. But for the New York Mets, inviting fans to select a new rally tune resulted in an online prank (Pek, 2010). Prior to the 2008 season, the Mets organization posted a web poll for fans to vote on their choice for the song that would be played in the 8th inning of home games at Shea Stadium. The list included popular favorites like Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer" and Billy Joel's "Movin' Out," but also had a blank field for fans to make their own write-in suggestions. Before long, online communities like Digg (a social news curator for trending content) and Fark (a news and entertainment aggregator) seized on the opportunity and encouraged their followers to vote for Rick Astley's 1980s pop hit "Never Gonna Give You Up" (Pek, 2010). The song had recently made its resurgence in popular culture thanks to the phenomenon of 'Rickrolling,' whereby a person is unexpectedly directed to a video or meme of Astley performing his hit (Friedman, 2008). Getting 'Rickrolled' was a common occurrence during the height of the prank, and many websites and bloggers vied to deliver the ultimate application of the joke. Although the song was the clear winner of the poll with over five million votes, the club claimed the process had been hijacked and instead staged a crowd poll of the top six songs at a game. When "Never Gonna Give You Up" was played, fans showered the stadium with boos and the team eventually opted for a more crowd-pleasing tune.

3.2.2. The National Hockey League

There are numerous other examples of polls being seized by crowds. Fan voting for the 2016 NHL All-Star Game also received international attention due to crowds voting in an unexpected way. The NHL staged a one-month campaign for fans to select players to play in the league's annual All-Star Game. Only a day after the voting opened, a post on the open-source community site Reddit urged fans to vote for John Scott, a 33-year-old journeyman more famous for his fighting skills than for his hockey prowess. Generally, All-Star games are reserved for the most talented players and the NHL assumed fans would vote for the best of the best. But what started as a joke mocking Scott's hockey ability quickly escalated into a public relations fiasco for the league, which was clearly not thrilled about the situation. After winning the fan vote, the NHL and Scott's team, the Arizona Coyotes, asked him to decline the opportunity to play in the game. Scott refused and was then traded to the Montreal Canadians and immediately placed in the minor leagues, making him ineligible to be an All-Star (Iversen, 2016).

In the aftermath immediately following Scott being traded to the Montreal Canadians, major backlash from fans and the media emerged. Journalists penned unflattering stories about the personal hardship that the NHL had unnecessarily inflicted on Scott and his family. Fans mocked the league for promoting an opportunity for fans to vote for players, but then manipulating the results. After a few days, the league relented and eventually appointed Scott as a captain for one of the All-Star teams. Through the process, Scott became the focal point of an otherwise meaningless game and went on to pen a heartfelt article in the Players' Tribune (Scott, 2016) about how he was mistreated by the league. The NHL, to its credit, eventually embraced the selection of Scott and exploited the attention it received. Thanks in part to the Scott phenomenon, more people watched the 2016 All-Star game than any one in previous years (Wyshynski, 2016). Ironically, the NHL ultimately named Scott the most valuable player of the event.

4. Lessons for managers

Crowdsourcing campaigns, when executed carefully, can be valuable exercises that allow firms to engage with their customers, solicit new ideas, and bring attention to their products or services. Still, managers must be aware of the potential undesirable and negative consequences of crowdsourcing and must be armed with a plan to manage these risks. The examples presented in this article all reveal that crowdsourcing does not lead to better ideas, knowledge, or outcomes automatically. Indeed, rather than the intended engagement of crowds to assist with organizational goals, crowds are empowered to respond in a variety of ways. In this section, we present three key lessons for managers to consider when developing a crowdsourcing strategy. These recommendations are based on the lessons learned from the crowdsourcing campaigns examined above.

4.1. Anticipate the worst

If the case of naming a British government research ship is any indication, no initiative is too obscure to arouse the attention of online communities. Virality is a powerful force (Bal, Archer-Brown, Robson, & Hall, 2013; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011) and when an idea, video, or campaign snowballs online it is all but impossible to control or predict what will ensue. Firms should anticipate the possibility of receiving joke entries or content that is simply unflattering to their brand. Indeed, one can assume that the general public will more likely participate in an action they find funny than make a serious contribution. However, when managers can anticipate these types of contributions, they can have a response strategy in place for such situations. If a campaign results in crowds poking fun of a brand or mocking its customers, firms may choose to play along and participate in the joke. Other companies may opt to stay silent. Chevy, for example, did not remove the negative ads that users made for the Tahoe, even though the videos disparaged the vehicle. Managers should decide well in advance of the campaign how much they are willing to tolerate and have a plan in place to take swift action if content crosses a line.

4.2. Develop conditions and be transparent

Many of the crowdsourcing examples in this article failed to include proper rules or conditions that could have saved unnecessary embarrassment or grief. In the case of the New York Mets song choice and the NHL All-Star Game selection, no rules were in place to prevent fans from seizing the vote. Voters expected a true democracy but the organizations were not pleased with that direction the vote went. To avoid this, firms can stipulate simple rules to govern crowdsourcing campaigns. Fan voting can be achieved by providing pre-selected options for fans and by prohibiting write-in votes. Or, as is the case with NERC's research ship, make it clear that the vote is merely for suggestions and that management will be making the final decision. When inviting

consumers to create content, as Chevy did with the Tahoe video campaign, managers can vet submissions before posting them publically to avoid disparaging or inappropriate content. Whatever the rules or conditions a firm develops, they should be clear and evident in advance of the campaign to avoid criticism from consumers.

4.3. Don't stifle the will of the crowd

When it went out of its way to prevent John Scott from participating in the All-Star Game, even going so far as to orchestrate a trade, the NHL came across as tone deaf and callous. The league had already made the mistake of devising a fan voting campaign that lacked the control it desired. However, had the league simply embraced the unexpected will of the crowd and gone along with the will of the fans, it could have simply learned from the experience and made the appropriate adjustments for future years. Attempting to take the vote away from fans only made the matter worse, as it proved to be much more damaging to the NHL than proceeding with the will of the people—especially for an event that was intended to be all about the fan experience. Firms that find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having their crowdsourcing activity unexpectedly seized by consumers should carefully weigh the risks of going against the crowd. Doing so can make consumers feel like their vote is meaningless and may lead to skepticism for any future crowdsourcing efforts. In most cases where crowdsourcing has gone amiss, elevated attention is already focused on the campaign. Thus, any reaction from a firm that undermines the crowd will be highly scrutinized in the public and is likely to amplify the backlash. As seen in the examples presented in this article, by the time a crowdsourcing event has been seized it is too late for managers to change course dramatically. Instead, a firm's best and sometimes only option is to go along for the ride.

5. Crowdthink and crowd hijacking

The concept of groupthink—that is, when groups of people come to irrational or dysfunctional decisions out of a desire to get along—has long been on the radar of managers and scholars (Janis, 1971; Turner & Pratkanis, 1998). Groupthink often harms teamwork in organizations when groups of individuals avoid controversial topics or creativity in their thinking. Because crowds—especially online crowds—do not necessarily have the same desire to achieve consensus or harmony among members that groups of people in the workplace do, the concept of groupthink is not appropriate in a crowdsourcing context. Instead, we introduce the concept of *crowdthink*, when crowds react to crowdsourcing initiatives by making a mockery of them. We suggest that the examples of the New York Mets and the NHL are examples of crowdthink. That is, in the cases of the New York Mets and the NHL, the submissions were joking in manner. Rather than take the vote seriously, those who voted turned the initiative into a joke. Similarly, the tale of Boaty McBoatface, presented at the beginning of this article, reveals a situation in which a crowd responded by turning a legitimate request into a joke. As such, we argue that managers should be aware of the possibility of crowdthink or crowds reacting in a joking manner. Ultimately, the cases presented in this article reveal an important point: Collective minds and collaboration do not necessarily elicit good ideas and it is possible that crowdthink can come into play, in which case absurd ideas can be submitted and promoted upward.

In addition to crowdthink, managers should be wary of *crowd hijacking*, wherein the crowd responds to the initiative by pushing its own agenda. Due to the anonymity afforded within most crowdsourcing initiatives, individuals in the crowd may not experience the desire to get along with other members or to avoid controversial topics or outcomes. It can be quite the opposite, in fact. In the cases of the Obama Administration and of Chevy Tahoe, the crowd responded by overwhelming the organization with content that was focused on hot-button opinions regarding the legalization of marijuana and climate change. In these cases, the response from the crowd was largely an effort to bring about social change. This is consistent with research on the psychology of crowds more generally, which reveals two key points about crowds: (1) the actions of a crowd reflect existing cultures and societies, and (2) both the actions and the crowd are shaped by society and can bring about social change (Reicher, 2001). While these points specifically refer to offline crowds, the examples presented in this article do indeed suggest that crowd actions in a crowdsourcing effort reflect these trends.

6. Final thoughts

Prpić et al. (2015) noted that the term crowd has historically been linked to a number of negative connotations (e.g., riots, mob mentality, looting). While we do not argue that these negative connotations around the term crowd should lead managers to avoid crowd-based initiatives, crowd-based initiatives can fail. The need to determine root

causes of such failures is important for managers to understand. We hope to have shed light on some of the common problems associated with idea crowdsourcing and crowd voting, in the hopes that others may be able to anticipate these and develop their crowd-based initiatives in such a way as to avoid them. The cases presented in this article reveal that the wisdom of the many is not necessarily useful or helpful and can often be used as an opportunity for empowered stakeholders to assume control of the crowd-based initiative. Indeed, managers cannot presume that crowdthink will go away or that a crowd will not attempt to hijack a crowdsourcing initiative in order to push its own agenda, and therefore must be proactive in planning to combat these threats.

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