Finding lead users is easier than you think

Eric von Hippl, in his book Democratizing Innovation, introduced the concept of "lead users". These are customers of yours who are already innovating the products and services you offer, by using them in different ways than you anticipated or by aggregating your products and services with other products and services to create a new solution. The classic example is the mountain bike, which was originally built by hand from a wide array of spare parts until Specialized noticed that there was a market for these bicycles rather than just selling the parts to people who were crafting an entirely new type of bicycle. These "lead users" practically created a new market.

Well, the hard part about lead users is finding them. Every firm has a few "lead users" but it may be hard to identify which ones have great ideas versus which customers are just very vocal complainers. In evaluating some social networking tools and having read "Groundswell", the task of identifying lead users may be a bit easier if you are willing to get into a real dialog with your customers.

Groundswell, the new book by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff of Forrester, does a good job of presenting the power of social networking and social media tools such as blogs, forums and other interactive media. What I failed to realize until recently is how powerful these techniques can be to help you identify your most enthusiastic and energized customers - the folks who may actually be your best lead users. If your firm has the stomach for interacting on the most immediate and public level with your clients and customers, you may have a short cut to better ideas and to lead users.

What several firms have found is that by blogging and creating the means for interaction between the company and the customer base, there are a number of great ideas that are exchanged. But more importantly, a few people self-identify themselves as actively engaged with your products and services in ways you had not considered. These are usually very active participants in online communities and can be recruited to provide insights and ideas about your products and services. This effort is a virtuous cycle - as you listen and take action on what the

lead users tell you, you gain even more insights and stronger relationships.

But, all of this comes at a price. Firms that are actively engaged with their customers have internal teams focused on blogging, forums and communities who are constantly exchanging information with their prospects and customers. To gain this level of exchange requires a significant investment in resources, and the willingness to "put it all out there" and hear both the good, and the bad, about your company, its products and services.

You can tap into lead users in ways you may never have expected, with less effort and more specific targeting, but it will require that you open up to a dialog with your customers at a level you've never had before.