



### Coloplast: User Involvement in Innovation

One of the key lessons about successful innovation is the need to get close to the customer. At the limit (and as Eric Von Hippel and other innovation scholars have noted<sup>1</sup>), the user can become a key part of the innovation process, feeding in ideas and improvements to help define and shape the innovation. The Danish medical devices company, Coloplast, was founded in 1954 on these principles when nurse Elise Sorensen developed the first self-adhering ostomy bag as a way of helping her sister, a stomach cancer patient. She took her idea to a various plastics manufacturers, but none showed interest at first. Eventually one, Aage Louis-Hansen discussed the concept with his wife, also a nurse, who saw the potential of such a device and persuaded her husband to give the product a chance. Hansen's company, Dansk Plastic Emballage, produced the world's first disposable ostomy bag in 1955. Sales exceeded expectations and in 1957, after having taken out a patent for the bag in several countries, the Coloplast company was established. Today the company has subsidiaries in 20 and factories in five countries around the world, with specialist divisions dealing with incontinence care, wound care, skin care, mastectomy care, consumer products (specialist clothing, etc.) as well as the original ostomy care division.

Keeping close to users in a field like this is crucial and Coloplast have developed novel ways of building in such insights by making use of panels of users, specialist nurses and other healthcare professionals located in different countries. This has the advantage of getting an informed perspective from those involved in post-operative care and treatment and who can articulate needs which might for the individual patient be difficult or embarrassing to express. By setting up panels in different countries the varying cultural attitudes and concerns could also be built into product design and development.

An example is the Coloplast Ostomy Forum (COF) board approach. The core objective within COF Boards is to try and create a sense of partnership with key players, either as key customers or key influencers. Selection is based on an assessment of their technical experience and competence but also on the degree to which they will act as opinion leaders and gatekeepers – for example by influencing colleagues, authorities, hospitals and patients. They are also a key link in the clinical trials process. Over the years Coloplast has become quite skilled in identifying relevant people who would be good COF board members – for example, by tracking people who author clinical articles or who have a wide range of experience across different operation types. Their specific role is particularly to help with two elements in innovation:

- Identifying, discussing and prioritizing user needs.
- Evaluating product development projects from idea generation right through to international marketing.

Importantly COF Boards are seen as integrated with the company's product development system and they provide valuable market and technical information into the stage gate decision process. This input is mainly associated with early stages around concept formulation (where the input is helpful in testing and refining perceptions about real user needs and fit with new concepts). There is also significant involvement around project development where involvement is concerned with evaluating and responding to prototypes, suggesting detailed design improvements, design for usability, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Von Hippel, *The Sources of Innovation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988).