Turning Good Ideas Into Commercial Products

Tom Greene

CIO
Colgate-Palmolive

The innovation engine is a critical one for us. We spent a great deal of time over the years perfecting our supply chain. The opportunity for us was all the activities that take place up into the supply chain. That is everything from the ideas to the concepts to the experimentation to the in-market testing before it becomes a commercial product. One of the areas that we decided to take a look at was ideation; that's where we start to generate all the ideas. The opportunity was that we get a lot of great ideas around the world from our employees as well as our third party partners. The challenge is how you sift through all of those ideas. Then you turn them into concepts, and then you manage the concepts through the rest of the pipeline. We worked with our third party partner, SAP. We went to them and said, "Here's an area where your products don't have a solution and it's critical for us; let's see what we can do." Coincidentally during the same period of time, they were developing a new modeling technique that would allow their customers to more easily adapt capability up front and then push information into SAP. We agreed that we would jointly embark on this effort together. One of the things that we did was we bought one of our main business users. We co-located them in Budapest with SAP's development team and members of our development team for a two week period. We sat down and talked about what's important, how our business runs. How do we collect ideas today? How do we want to be able to categorize them? What are the important things that we need to be able to do? We needed a platform that was available outside the four walls of Colgate. That was a particularly important requirement. Then the next was providing an input mechanism, a template, that we could then have somebody within Colgate easily sift through using key words, and then once finding it, taking those ideas and being able to send it back and ask for clarification, or, creating it really quickly. All of a sudden they identify an idea that looks kind of interesting, being able to quickly create a community around that. Here are the ten people at Colgate that have this expertise that we want further clarification on what we think. Is this a good idea? Does this have some opportunity? We can quickly turn that back around and get it to the people that can start to massage this and take it from an idea to a concept. Once it becomes a concept, then actually help project manage that process all the way through to a commercial product. Some of the key lessons that we learned from this experience were, number one, proximity. It is important when you're doing a rapid development scenario that you have the business users sitting directly with the developers. In this case it was SAP developers and Colgate developers together. Co-locating in one place made a big difference. Getting the direct feedback from the business is also key, rather than someone writing down some requirements and handing them over to the developers so that they can try and figure out, "What did they really mean?" and doing the iterative design. This new modeling capability that SAP was bringing also helped tremendously in our ability for our business users to actually see the end result of what they were asking for. The opportunity for misunderstandings was significantly reduced. Lastly, working closely, as we generally do, with our third party partners on solutions, typically generates the best result.