Predicting the market demand for an innovation based on the concept of social contagion

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It seems really quite amazing to be at the point of finishing this project. It has been a part of my life, as a mixture of hobby and work, for over nine years now. I like the idea of sitting down and looking back at the whole process. The idea for this research came to me whilst I was on holiday on the beautiful Dutch island of Schiermonnikoog. That was in the year 2000. Lying on the beach I read a book, The Meme Machine written by Susan Blackmore, of which I had earlier read a review in New Scientist, explaining a new viewpoint: looking at the world from the perspective of bits of behaviour and their ‘struggle’ for survival, rather than taking a person-centric view as we generally tend to do. I saw the specific beach-related behaviours going on around me and I saw that this perspective opened up new possibilities. In my work I was busy trying to understand why consumers choose to adopt and use new products (which can be seen as competing behaviours) and here was a fascinating new viewpoint which had not been tried before. When I got back to work after the summer, I proposed my idea as a new area for applied research to the then head of my expertise group, Nico Pals. Nico got me started at the beginning of 2001, providing the budget and taking part, together with Esther Huisman and myself, in turning the idea into a workable instrument that could, in principle, be used by firms to assess the quality of their new product ideas. That was the start of a process which has since included many twists and turns, which has taken me to the heart of new product development activities in various organisations, which has taught me how to improve my research skills and which I have been lucky enough to see through to this point. And I have been fortunate. Really fortunate with the many people who have gone out of their way to help this project and to provide it with everything it needed to succeed. Initially our focus was not on scientific research, but on developing the instrument, which we first called ‘The Fortune Teller’ and in a later version ‘SUMI’, and on trying it out in practical product development projects. More people got involved in this work, including Jente Klok, Marjan de Jonge, Sven Schultz and more recently Sonoko Takahashi, Cees Hannema and Johan Ruiter. We were honoured when Sander Maatman, director of Innovation Fit, agreed to further commercialize SUMI and together with Sander Kaspers, Simon Meijer and David Marks brought our approach to a broader market. Many others have also helped to bring SUMI to organisations and although I cannot possibly name everyone, special mention must go to Jeroen Soffers, Paul Valk, Marcel Prins, Frank van der Heijden, Aloys Maas, Berry Vetjens, Herman Pals, Jack Bloem, Evert van den Akker, Jantine van der Weerd, Gerrit-Jan Valk, Dimitri Hehanussa and Wouter Zomer. Within the organisation of KPN Research and since 2003 within TNO, I have been supported in this work by many colleagues who put their faith in what we are doing, including Rob Langezaal, Enid Mante, Egon van der Veer, Natascha Agricola, Angelien Sanderman, Eric Veldkamp, Suzanne van Kooten and Erik Huizer. I have also been aided in the different phases by Elly van den Akker, Monique Olsthoorn, Josée Verbeek, Sandra Struijker and Hennie Jelsma. In March 2003, Nico Pals again nudged me in the right direction by setting up a meeting with my old boss, Roland Ortt, who had recently joined the Delft University of Technology. The
three of us agreed to work on the scientific side of SUMI and for the last six-and-a-half years we have met up about once every six weeks to move this research forwards. During the phase 2003 to 2006, much of what we did fell in the category “hobby”. But getting down to real research during only evenings and weekends is, for me in any case, untenable. This spurred us on to organize funding for scientific research and yet again we were given the support of many talented people. These include Nico Baken, Erik Eising, Guido Luijten and Herbert Nieuwland from KPN, Willem de Jager, Frank Verhulst and Maartje van Hardeveld from Rabobank, Sander Maatman, again, from Innovation Fit and, from TNO, Erik Fledderus, Marc van Lieshout, Johan Bruin and especially Laurens Hoedemaker who moved mountains for me and without whose help I would not be writing this now. And what a joy to be able to focus on the research in the daytime, during the working week!

In 2006, I spoke to Jaap Wieringa at the University of Groningen about my research and he suggested that I talk to Tammo Bijmolt, Professor of Marketing. Again I was lucky that Tammo was so open and accepting that we could join forces. And what a benefit to me and to this project he has been. He has imparted much knowledge and wisdom and brought my methodological approach to new heights, albeit still just a fraction of his own. Tammo’s relaxed style and the friendliness of his department (I have enjoyed the company of Adriana, Matilda, Jenny, Hans, Auke, Peter and others) made doing this research a joy. Tammo, thanks for everything. I have really enjoyed working with you, I consider you a brilliant supervisor and I hope that after this project our collaboration will continue, not to mention the occasional jog. And now in 2009 the manuscript commission has deemed my dissertation defensible. I feel it is a great honour to have Professors Peter Leeflang and Ruud Frambach from the Netherlands and Rosanna Garcia from the USA taking part in the final phase of this project. In the stress of these last days, trying to improve my dissertation as much as possible in the time available, I have often been guided by Rosanna’s relativism: a good PhD is a finished PhD! Amen to that!

More than anything I am indebted to both Roland and Nico. Roland, you have treated me with an enthusiastic, positive attitude and shown great belief in me. You have guided my first steps in taking SUMI into the scientific world and raised the quality of what I was doing while we co-authored the publications which together form this dissertation. Even to the point that we, together with Nico, received the European Journal of Innovation Management’s Outstanding Paper of the Year award! You also shared many of your astute views on life and work which have not only helped me on many occasions but also helped shape my own view on life. Sparring with you really is great fun and I look forward with eagerness to the next phase of our collaboration. Nico, you have encouraged me, cultivated what talent I showed and helped to shape the situation around me to my benefit. And you have done all this selflessly, without giving any sign that you are fed up doing all the giving! For example when you presented the work we had done to the jury of the Diana prize (TNO’s ICT innovation award), you used your talent to put forward a convincing argument and you won the award. And then they gave it to me! Your experience and calm approach has saved
me many headaches. And ‘Nico’s law’ (If the answer to the question, ‘What would happen if we don’t do it?’, is acceptable, then don’t do it) has saved me hours of unnecessary slog. I am so grateful to you.

Outside of the work setting I have also enjoyed great fortune. My Mum, my brothers and my sister Maggie have encouraged me and listened to my tales, and my Dad, who gave me my enquiring mind, has always been with me, in me. The very last time I spoke to him was in April 2000 and in that conversation we talked about my decision to try to set up a PhD project. Well, Dad, it took a while but here we are! I so wish you were here in person to enjoy it with us. My in-laws have also been great; always interested and supportive. I love your warmth and acceptance. My friends and neighbours have also listened and inspired me; thanks go to David, Klaas, Nico and Seard, and to Pepijn, for your talent as a sparring partner and for the wisdom you have shared with me. Thanks also to my paranymphs, Klaas and Jente: you have been with me throughout the whole process, through all the highs and lows, through my own personal difficulties, constantly guiding and reflecting, challenging me, laughing with me and being thoroughly exceptional people! Without you all I’d be nowhere. I also want to thank my three wonderful daughters, Middy, Anna Mae and Félien, for putting up with a Dad who too often leaves home early and gets home late instead of giving them more of the attention they deserve. And Mirjam of course. You know.

I have been blessed with you all!!

David Langley
October 2009
Haren