

CROWDSOURCING IDEAS

Rather than just look within for innovation, companies are increasingly turning to contests to generate cutting-edge ideas

Joeanna Rebello Fernandes | TNN

Last year, the Gates Foundation announced that it would stump up \$100,000 for the designer who reinvented the condom. With 812 ideas in already, the world may well be on its way to getting a more fun and pleasurable condom. It's not just non-profits who want to spur innovations through open contests, businesses, too, are increasingly using the competition route.

R&D labs are expensive and anyway, not all the smart people work for your company, so why not hold a contest to get the best minds competing to think for you? That's the rationale behind these contests. As for the winners, they don't just get trophies but also open-ended benefits like mentorship from industry mavens, job offers, venture capital funding and business evaluation.

Vijay Pandey, VP Bosch Power Tools, says competitions help his company "crowd-source innovative designs wherein the most scalable ones can be replicated". In 2012, Bosch Power Tools joined the National Institute of Design to sponsor an 'India Changers' competition which invited students to think up alternative ideas for public amenities like signage, street lighting, public seating and so on. "If the (winning) solutions are commercially viable, we network with industry bodies and entrepreneurs as well as government institutions so that they can bring the concept to fruition," says Pandey.

Some schools of liberal education oppose the idea of a competitive culture but it is now drawing interest across sectors — design, engineering, architecture, art, computing and business practice — and also from quarters that did not traditionally use such exercises to find top talent.

When Microsoft floated its Completely Boss Challenge last year, seeking out contestants from the small and medium scale enterprises sectors in India, it pitted 2,500 CEOs against each other. For winner Uday Purohit, MD of Neptunus Power Plant Services, which is invested in electromotive diesel engines, the incentive from Microsoft was irresistible — a five-year 365 degree growth plan for his business, customised by industry experts like Microsoft, CRISIL, LinkedIn, Moneycontrol.com, Webchutney and Door.

"If it was a cash prize or a car I wouldn't have participated," maintains Purohit. "Awards like these not only recognize a company's efforts, but also give its employees a sense of accomplishment and pride. Clients get the reassurance that

they're dealing with credible people." This was the company's first go at a competition. "Competitions like these demand a lot of time from top management," reveals Purohit, who has now set his sights on the 2017 edition of the 'Best Places to Work' competition.

Competitions have now gone global via specialist websites like Kaggle, Designboom, Competitions.org and Studentscompetitions.com, and they are bringing in a more diverse competitive base. Designboom, a leading digital architectural and design magazine rated by Time Magazine as one of the top 100 design influencers, launched its Competitions platform in 2001. "Our first competitions saw approximately 1,000 registrations from across the globe, while today that number has more than tripled," says Birgit Lohmann, editor-in-chief.

Agencies like Designboom help sponsors host and configure competitions. It counts among its clients Hermes, Lexus, Renault, Fujitsu, Swarovski and others. Lohmann points out that the competition allows young people to present their concepts to companies which might otherwise seem out of reach. The winning project for Fu-



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Robert Lyngman, chief strategy officer at Stockholm-based Student Competitions, says that competitions can drive innovation. Companies can, for instance, post a problem online and invite solutions. He points out that universities too have started using competition as a tool to match students to scholarships. He cites the example of an engineering challenge competition ABB, a power supply company, promoted in conjunction with a Swedish university. The winner would score a scholarship to a Master's pro-



gramme at the university and later an internship at ABB. "We see a huge interest from international employers looking to target Indian students and professionals too," Lyngman says.

One of the companies to seek submissions to its annual engineering challenge via Studentcompetitions.com, was QuEST Global, a diversified global engineering services company. Over past editions of Ingenium, their national competition for final year students of engineering and technology, QuEST Global has actually hired six winners. "Besides, the competition connects winning teams to the company's customers and venture capitalists and potential," says Niketh Sundar, global head, HR (People Function).

He says some concepts are radical. "Entries like hybrid human powered electric vehicle (UTOPIA) from Jamia Millia Islamia or the intelligent wheelchair from Siddaganga Institute of Technology could be game-changers in the near future," he says. Interestingly, a lot of groundbreaking submissions came from smaller, less reputed engineering colleges in the country.

Such open-sourced inspiration isn't new to the history of innovation. In 18th century England, the drive to find a solution to locate the longitude of a ship at sea and the inability of captains and engineers to emerge with a solution, led the British Parliament to throw down the gauntlet to the crowds in the form of a competition with a purse of 20,000 pounds, called the Longitude Prize. John Harrison, a clockmaker and carpenter rose to the challenge and the first marine chronometer was born, showing that competition has its uses.