

**Understanding the role of 'process' in value co-creation**

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Abstract

Existing research on value co-creation enumerates value as an outcome of co-creation process. The purpose of this article is to lay emphasis on process, not only for its role in co-creation of value but process itself being a value. Process has been largely studied from the viewpoint of value creating framework between firm and customer. Value co-creation is divided into three phases i.e., pre, during and post value co-creation phase to make an elaborated inquiry of process aspect. Interaction implicit in co-creation is deemed to be the source of value for customers. The result provides fresh perspective on process dimension along with its significance as a value proposition for both firm and customer.

***Keywords:*** Value, Value co-creation, Process, Experience, Service.

### **Introduction**

Organisations across the world, today are striving to satisfy their customers need more effectively and efficiently. In order to achieve their objective, firms are in constant working on crafting and delivering of an attractive valuable proposition for their customers. Role of value has become pivotal for achieving customer satisfaction and loyalty. This overt focus on value has also turned it into one of the most ill-defined and overused concept in management and social sciences (Khaifa, 2004). Growing popularity of value amongst academician and practitioner has enabled Marketing Science Institute to keep value in his top research priorities for year 2008-10. Literature on value has interpreted it through the perspective of sociology, psychology, economics, and axiology.

Opacity and obscurity on value has paved the way to the multiple description of value. Value as a construct is defined both as a uni-dimensional and multi-dimensional in nature. The earlier attempt to define value was by Zeithmal (1988, p. 14) who stated value to be the “consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given.” While the concept seems rational in approach, it fails to define utility, worth, benefits and quality associated with the products. Moreover, the study performed by Holbrook (1994) reveals value to be something more than above defined attribute as interactive, relativistic preferential experience. Woodruff (1997) looks on value as a mean-end approach where the attributes of the product constitute as a mean to attain desire end, in form of goal satisfaction and value emerges from the customer learned perception, preferences and evaluation.

Presence of term ‘creation’ in value creation connotes value to be created instrumentally, which is not always the case. Instead value, can even emerge through mere possession of object as a symbolic value. However, just to avoid confusion term value creation is used (Gronroos, 2008). Earlier theories of marketing define the value creation

process as firm activities, where firms act as an aggregator of resources, to produce value for the customers. Value is created through the exchange of goods for money where the locus for exchange is market. This good dominant logic mindset was operative in earlier conceptualisation, considering exchange to be the process through which value was created for both the parties (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Emerging views on service as “the fundamental basis of exchange” has started impugning the traditionally established view on good-dominant logic, giving way to the recent paradigm christened as service dominant logic. This recently established SD logic considers value to be phenomenological and experiential in nature, is created through value-in use (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Acceptance and dissemination of SD logic has culminated into tremendous amount of research on value co-creation. Despite of lot of researches being undertaken, there still remains lot of obscurity in respect to various elements of value co-creation. Process represents one such grey area which needs to be explored and addressed. Some of the research questions pertaining to value co-creation raised in this are:

- What does it mean by process in value co-creation and who are involved in value co-creation?
- What are key factors that are important for fostering value co-creation?
- Why study of process is important in value co-creation?

Answers to above question would bring some interesting findings for both academician and practitioner, who are constantly in search for creating an engaging and interactive process. The study represents an attempt to address the deficiency in literature to explore value co-creation. Being exploratory in nature tends to focuses on value co-creation through the lens of processes. Its first section dwells deep into literature to reveal the meaning and evolution of value co-creation process. Next section addresses value creation both from

firm and customer perspective. The third section presents the framework of value co-creation. Finally study tries to bring the finding from various perspectives along with discussion and implications of the result.

## **Literature Review**

### **Background**

Advent of industrial revolution has instituted production and product-centric view in the mind of the marketers. Organisations who were engrossed with production view, try to produce on a large scale and sell it on lower rates. Similarly product orientation view, stresses on product superiority in terms of attributes and features. Despite of claiming customer benefits, both the orientation proved to be failure, as integration of customer voice was absent. Evolving from their earlier orientation on product and production, organisations have started looking upon markets and segment to serve their customer better. Adopting market and segment orientation helps firms in better customisation of their products in accordance with the need of the customers. This concept too suffers from drawbacks, as catering to market through mass customisation deals with changes in the production process of the firm, rather than incorporating customer need and wants (Seth et al., 2000).

Advent of technology, empowerment of customer, association within networks and communities, presence of information on mere click, and globalisation of nations has altered the old silos built on exchange theory. Rapid global changes witnessed in recent era has turned passive and dormant customers into more active and demanding in terms of knowledge, skill, roles and responsibilities. Norman & Ramirez (1993) emphasises on the role of a successful company, is to bring different economic actor come together to create value rather than looking it from value chain perspective. The whole idea is, thus to mobilize the customer and reconfigure their existing roles. Mass customisation tool of market oriented

firm to garner customer loyalty, start looking unworthy, for unable to tap individual preferences. These changing dynamics of markets and customers has forced companies to orient themselves into customer centric organisations through incorporation of individual customer needs and want into their offerings. Integrating customer voice in value co-creation would be a win-win situation for both firm and customer. Where in firm would retain long term customer satisfaction and loyalty while customer would be receiving more personalised offering catered to its need and demand.

Initial literature on value co-creation consider it to be a co-production process where customer incorporation was limited to customisation of final offering in accordance to their demand (Rameiz, 1999; Normann & Rameiz, 1993). They further argue on shifting some of the roles and responsibilities to their customer, for managing some of its external affairs, tend to be an attractive value proposition for firm. Ikea used the similar ways in transferring some of the roles to their customers in form of assembling and transportation of furniture. Bendapudi and Leon (2003) describe co-production as merely a facilitation process which turns into co-creation on final consumption of value. Gummesson (1996) explains it as a production and creation of joint value by organisations.

Emphasizing on operant resources, such as knowledge, skills, and competencies, are the one which are exchanged in value creation process, Vargo and Lusch (2004) argues on operand resources as value creator in earlier good dominant logic. Woodruff (1997) takes value creation as a goal attainment process, a move from desired attribute or consequences. Insisted on value as value-in use, he put value generation from consumption process. Positive experiences through value-in use govern the long term customer relations of customer with the firm. Favourable experiences creates positive image in the mind of customer and while negative experiences takes customer away from the firm (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a and 2004b).

### Value Co-creation

Term co-creation was used by Kambil *et al.* (1996) for the first time in association with role of customer in marketing. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) in their seminal work on co-creation popularised it as a personalised experiences with the customers as a basis of value co-creation. Emphasising on interaction, Gronroos (2000) defines value co-creation as a joint value creation exercise through interaction between supplier and customer. Disagreeing on the fundamental premises of Lusch and Vargo (2006), which proposes that customers are always co-creator of value and service are fundamental basis of exchange, Gronroos (2008) propose interaction as a fundamental basis of exchange between firm and customer and customer as an independent value creator. He propounded firm to be a value facilitator whereas firm can co-create value by joining customer in his value creation process. Payne *et al.* (2008) stresses on value co-creation as process for creating superior value proposition and value determination through relationship experience by both customer and supplier.

Expanding the earlier work on value, Edwardsson *et al.* (2011) explains the contextual nature of value as a social value which is shaped up by social structure. Social norms and forces determine the nature of value and kind of interaction between firm and customer. Any entity whether firm or customer does not exist in isolation rather they are encompassed by various other actor or clique in which they operate. Along with it Nuttavuthisit (2010) refers to four strategies for stimulating co-creation practices: choice, complement, cause and communality. Thus customer can indulge in co-creation practices for self and others through participation or creation. Roser *et al.* (2009, p. 9) defines value co-creation as “an active, creative and social process based on collaboration between producers and users, that is initiated by the firm to generate value for customers”. Referring to various approaches adopted by organisations in managing and co-creation of value, Xie *et al.* (2008) points out

value co-creation as a presumption process, involving various activities such as physical, mental and socio-psychological in it.

### **Value creation process**

Value creation process takes place through interaction between firm and customer. Exchange of operant resource takes place between firm and customer. Early good-dominant logic views value creation from production perspective where exchange of operand resource takes place. But with the advent of service-dominant logic, perspective of understanding good or product has been changed from mere core product to bundle of benefit.

Thus logic takes the view that service is exchanged in form of process, information, knowledge, skill rather than merely goods. Service dominant logic is looking at everything from broader perspective and encompasses analysis for deeper understanding and meanings. When doing analysis from value creation perspective, two types of value emerges, first one is value-in exchange and second one is value in use. Value in exchange develops when firm acting as resource integrator brings in various factor of production through transformation process creates value. This value is not a final value rather this is facilitated value or proposed value. Since customer is the final arbiter of value, it is the customer who through consumption process determines real value or value-in use.

### **Understanding 'process' in value co-creation**

#### **Key element of value co-creation process**

Value co-creation process has been defined as joint value creation process where firm and customer interact to create superior value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). It is also defined as a creative and social process (Edwardsson *et al.*, 2011). Not only social aspect value co-creation process also integrates deep psychological aspects. Value co-creation as argued by Gronroos and Voima (2012) is a process where customer is always an independent



value creator and firm can become co-creator in value creation by interacting with customer and thus jointly can co-create value. A process is defined as series of steps, activities or act to transform resources as input into the desired outcome as an output. So a process based perspective relates to the change in the resources induced through interaction between firm and customer. Considering process based perspective, Payne et al. (2008, p.85) has viewed value co-creation as a “relationship between the provider and the customer as a longitudinal, dynamic, interactive set of experiences and activities performed by the provider and the customer, within a context, using tools and practices that are partly based on routine and unconscious behaviour”.

For the purpose of understanding and delineating nature of process in value co-creation, we would be examining all the elements of process, different types of processes involved, and who are involved in value co-creation. Thus we conceptualise ‘process’ in value co-creation as engagement activity between firm and customer built on the pillars of deeply held interaction and resource sharing. Higher the engagement level, more the customer would be deriving phenomenal and experiential value, leading to higher satisfaction and sustained relations between firm and customer. Engagement means active involvement and contribution by various actors involved. Dialogue is essential prerequisite for any of the interactive engagement to kick start.

For the study of ‘Process’, value co-creation is divided in three phases, which are:

- (1) Pre value co-creation phase
- (2) During value co-creation phase
- (3) Post value co-creation phase.

Each of the phases of value co-creation would be studied to understand the underlying process or mechanism for enhancing value to be produced during the co-creation phase. Any

value co-creation comprises of three basic processes which are: (1) Customer process of value creation (2) Supplier process of value creation and (3) Joint process/encounter process of value creation (Gronroos and Ravald, 2011; Payne et al. 2008). Further we would study what is role of each actor in all of the three phases. Next we would like to find out how the transformation process takes place. Various case examples in each of the phase are integrated to bring out process part for clear understanding.

### **Pre value co-creation phase**

There is certain important arrangement which has to be scheduled before entering in co-creation of value. Both firm and customer has to assess their potential, competency and their interest for co-creation as it is not that everyone could co-create, instead it needs specific type of resource integrators who readily interested as a volunteer or sponsored participants. We further bifurcate process of pre value co-creation into two processes: (1) Firm pre value co-creation requisite, and (2) customer pre co-creation requisite.

#### **Firm pre value co-creation requisite**

Numbers of things are required by firms beforehand for initiating value co-creation. Firms should have clear understanding of themselves that is their strengths and weaknesses, and their customers. Firms should have answer to following question before involving themselves into co-creation:

- Why to go for value co-creation process?
- Who are the customers which can be involved in co-creation?
- What to achieve through co-creation?
- What is the governing mechanism involved in co-creation?
- What are the different ways for involving your customer in co-creation?

Firm must understand why value co-creation is important to them and what difference it can create from past. If the expected difference produced will be little or negligible effect, than its better to leave it.

### **Customer pre-value co-creation requisite**

Customers being the most important key, their participation become pivotal for the success or failure of any co-creation activity. Customer's participation is also subject to various deterrents that can be attributed to the lack of knowledge, interest, skills, time and resources. Customers who are interested in any value co-creation also try to answer some of the questions:

- Is it worth involving in any value co-creation activity?
- How would I benefit from my participation?
- Would the organisation stay with his promise or it would be an exploitation of my skills
- What if I lack in essential knowledge and skills for the co-creation activity?
- Is this activity benefits me or other people and stakeholders too.
- What is my role in value co-creation

Customer being a social entity co-creates value not only for himself but for others. So the co-creation task should also take this in concern

### **During value co-creation phase**

Once all the ingredients necessary to start value co-creation process are identified, both the firm and customers can initiate value co-creation process. Interaction becomes the locus of co-creation activity through interaction and sharing of resources between firm and customer. Integration of various operand and operant resources in form of socio-cultural and physical resources is the key activity for the creation of value.

**Role of firm**

Earlier views consider firm to be one who is entrusted with the responsibilities of creating value. Firm creates value through exchange and market used to be to be the locus of activity. Paradigm shift witnessed in recent times has forced them to shift away from earlier view of customer being passive to the recent views which consider customer as an active creator and arbiter of value and firm acting merely as facilitator. Firm has to foster a rich learning and interactive environment for intense customer engagement. During sponsored co-creation, firm has to provide customer with the learn from the customers on their ways of interacting with each other, resource sharing taking place amongst customer, learning taking place between customers and customer community. Contextual variables also play an important role in the value co-creation and it could act as a triggering event for co-creation. Firm should learn all such impulses which could act in stimulating customer's involvement.

**Role of Customer**

Contribution of customers and their roles are critical for successful value co-creation. Roles of customer are defined as the behaviour exhibited by customers due to position occupied. During value co-creation phase the most pertinent question arise is regarding how co-creation process takes place? Through the encounter process customers and customers, customers and firm met each other. Prolong interaction between them results in exchange of social, psychological and cultural resources. Role assigned to customers or they themselves undertook it, ranges from, co-creator, co-producer, co-designer, co-innovator, co-ideator, co-developer, co-distributor, co-promoter and social responsibility actors. While the boundaries between various roles are obscure and the same customer who is innovator could also be promoter. Customer could undertake multiple roles simultaneously at the same juncture.

Once clear with their roles, customers need to understand their goal which tends to be embedded in their value systems (Hibbert et al., 2012). Value system of the customers

enables them to contribute physical, social and cultural resource in the process. While the physical resource consists of the energy and time invested by customers, social resources comprises of social capital and relationship value, and cultural resources consists of dream, imagination, specialised knowledge and skills earned through their ancestor history. Exchange of resources amongst customers and the firm could enhance mutual learning from each other and developing social ties amongst the various actors. Lot of issues too emerges in 'during value co-creation phase' such as how to manage customer–customer interactions when one lot of customers posses requisite skills and knowledge while other lot still lags in required competencies? How to map customer skills and competencies with that of firm

### **Post value co-creation phase**

Post value co-creation phase comprises of evaluation and improvement of existing process, to further enhance and enrich co-creation environment. Evaluation of value co-creation should be looked down from point of attaining the perceived and expected value. If the customer experience gets enhanced through value co-creation, it means customer satisfaction and loyalty is achieved.

While evaluation has to be performed in number of areas in value co-creation i.e. task feasibility, customer self efficacy, skills and competency mapping. Kind of task defines the level of customer involvement in co-creation. More the customer finds task to be challenging and daunting, more are they excited to associate with the task. Frustration, anger and task dissonance could generate if customers find themselves being unable to perform the task successfully. Role of firm becomes critical at this juncture where it has to act as coach, teacher and mentor to guide them, motivate them and entrust with the desired skills required for competitions task. Firms has to make sure that customer self efficacy directs their self directed learning. Engaging in co-creation can also build strong emotional attachment of

customers with the activity and outcome. Thus it could also provide impetus for their sustained engagement in learning process and built a long term social ties with firm.

Customer self efficacy also emerges as one of the most important factor in evaluation of co-creation process (Hibbert et al., 2012). Greater the customers desire for self learning, more the customer would be believing on his self efficacy abilities to steer the co-creation activity. Role of other customers and firms are very important as they help the customer in designing favourable or unfavourable views for the co-creation process. Customers also evaluate the benefits it received for the energy, time and resources poured in. If the customer feels that they are not getting the equivalent value for their efforts, they could find themselves cheated in relationship.

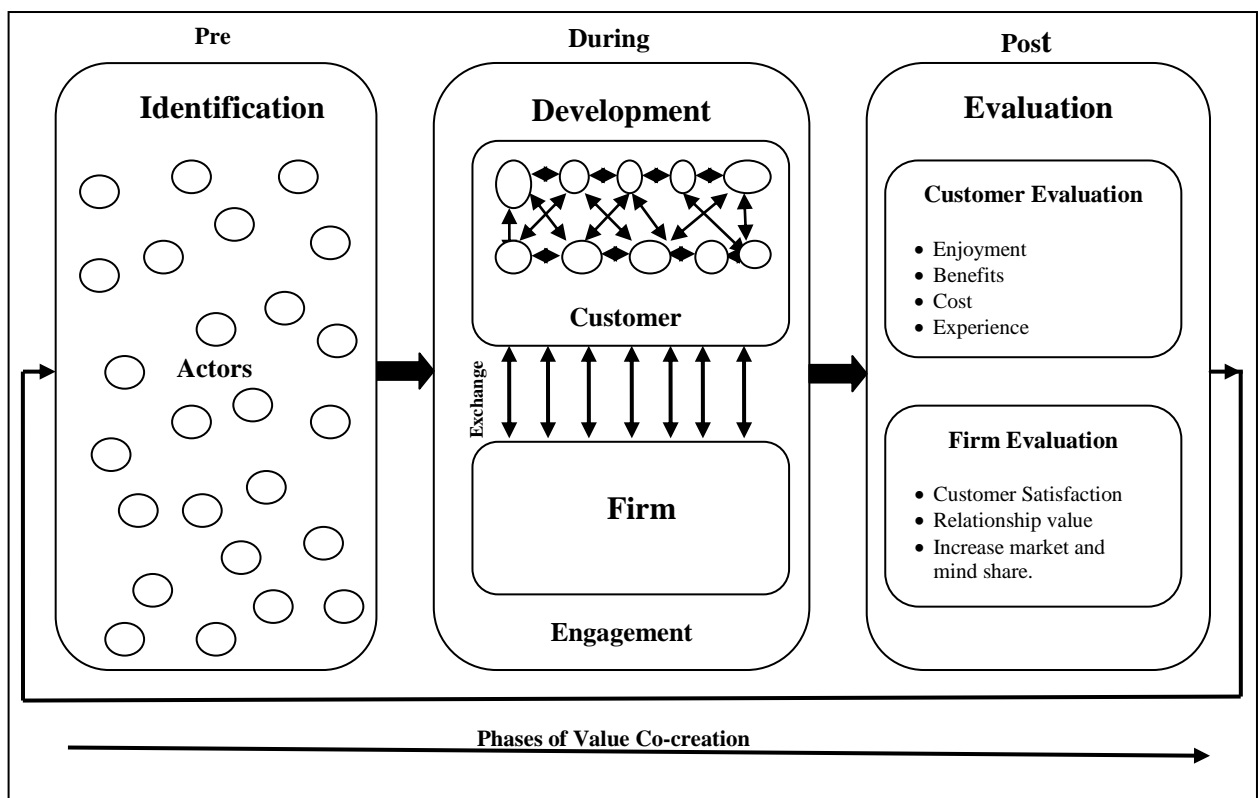


Figure 1 Value Co-creation Process

For firm point of view, feedback and information received from customer in post value co-creation is highly critical for improvements and pursuing others to participate. Firms should make sure those customers get engages in self directed learning without any coercive actions. Role of firm should be more of more of monitor and facilitator in the above activity.

### **Case Study**

In year 2012 Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL) a major FMCG giant watched his market share declining to 41% to its nearest rival Maggi, who has now notched the top position with 47% of market in approx Rs 8.6 billion (\$0.16 billion) ketchup category (Pani, P, 2012). With the competition expected to be getting more fierce and intense in coming days due to entry of new players like Del Monte, Heinz, Sil, Druk and various private labels such as Future Group's Tasty Treat, made HUL to look forward in co-creating deep engaging experiences with their customers and in return winning back customers loyalty and satisfaction. HUL launched a five month long 'Chalo Kissanpur' campaign, aimed towards kids of Mumbai and Delhi, for acquainting them with tomato growing and building brand connect for its Kissan ketchup.

#### **Pre Value Co-creation Phase**

Before the launch of campaign, HUL along with its marketing agency Lowe Lintas worked on the number of aspects, some are identifying the their customers for this initiative, equipping them with the desired resources, skills and competency, designing various incentives and motivation for engaging in campaign, creating promotional campaign through malls and launch of separate website. Governing mechanism of the activity was pre-decidedly kept in the hands of Hindustan Unilever Ltd to ensure that the activity achieve its desired goal to achieve. Kids were decided to be kept as target audience for the desired activity. Regaining both market and mind share was the key objective in the mind of customer.

#### **During Value Co-creation**

2.5 million Tomato seeds was distributed to people in Mumbai and Delhi through sachet attached in morning newspaper. Simultaneous promotional campaign were aired which requested people to join their kids in a nature friendly initiative. People were asked to

paste photos of their plant on to the facebook page and a special website created named [www.kissanpur.co.in](http://www.kissanpur.co.in). Tips were shared with the people on growing tomatoes, to keep up their zeal. People were asked to share their experiences while growing tomatoes, post their photos of kids with the tomato plants. Website invites people to register their societies and their friends for the events, in a way to create a social circle and word of mouth. People experiences in form of their emotion while growing plant were tapped to create an emotional connect.

A major gratification kept for inviting participation was using tomatoes of 100 top tomato growers in preparing Kissan ketchup along with their name featuring as label. During the creation of memorable experience HUL kept his role as a facilitator while encouraging kids and parents to involve in conversation with other participants, to enhance their experience. Company encourage Kissanpur community to turn stronger by introducing new members and asking them to share their story. Positive feedback was provided by company in form of acknowledgement and appreciation to keep up the moral of the customers. Thus a small but interesting activity to involve customer in building brand activity for the company was undertaken.

### **Post Value Co-creation Phase of the Activity**

Post value co-creation phase is also an evaluation phase of the activity wherein both customers and firm tries to find out whether the activity undertaken was able to generate desired results or not? Kissanpur activity has generated huge customer response in form of more than 0.2 million people liking the facebook page. It is also noticed as one of the few brand on twitter to get hash tag, trending as #Kissanpur. Campaign has helped company in increasing sales to 120 basis point and achieveing high brand recall amongst its customer base.



### **Conclusion**

Value is to be understood in two dimensions, one as an outcome of a process, value and another where the process itself is a value. Interaction and integration of resources by actors leads to the generation of value, through mutual exchange and participation. The fun and enjoyment of being the part of the process creates value in the form of experiences. Introspection of several works on value co-creation suggests it as a joint value creation by firm and customer through the exchanges of operant and operand resources between them. Interaction implicit in exchange process facilitates building of trust based relationship and knowledge enabled learning amongst actors (Payne et al., 2008).

Value stems from customer learned perception, preferences and evaluation before, during and after the encounter process. The value co-creation process outlines the roles of various and way they create value through learning and knowledge. Value stemming out from value co-creation process has to be distinguished into a broader context and hierarchal level, initially from desired product attribute and performance to desired consequences and finally to desired customers' goal and purposes (Woodruff, 1997; Payne et al., 2008). Finally value co-creation process is an appropriate way for inducing desired expectation among customer through engagement to build long term relationship and excelling firm from internal orientation to external orientation.

### **Research Discussion and Implications**

Value co-creation from process based perspective is necessary to be studied as till date only outcome has been studied. The process of value co-is deeply influenced by various stream of research such as sociology, psychology, axiology, economics and marketing point of view. All these streams have to be studied separately to know the effect of individual stream on the process and kind of value created.

Most of the time, deep hedonic perspective integrated in process is overlooked so how interaction can be deeply enriched and how interaction and dialog could be made more meaningful in process has to be established. Once the nature of process is decoded, it would be helpful for manager to incorporate voice of their customer more swiftly and can be more customer centric organisation. Also inefficient process can lead to complication and biasness in value co-created. Further research needed to explore how much space does firm should give to their customer, to co-create in process. In fact process efficiency can lead to more cost saving and customer satisfaction.

The process of value co-creation should be easy, cost effective and simple. It should also be laden with fun, fantasy and play so that interest in process could be maintained and incentive should be offered to those customers who participate in process as customer participation can decrease monetary cost but would increase non-monetary cost in form of time and efforts. Thus firm should also work toward decreasing time and monetary cost through attractive incentives whether monetary or non-monetary in nature. Value co-creation process is a way forward for any company to truly customer centric and global in nature.

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