

Social searches and group designs: The problems with (un)solicited advice

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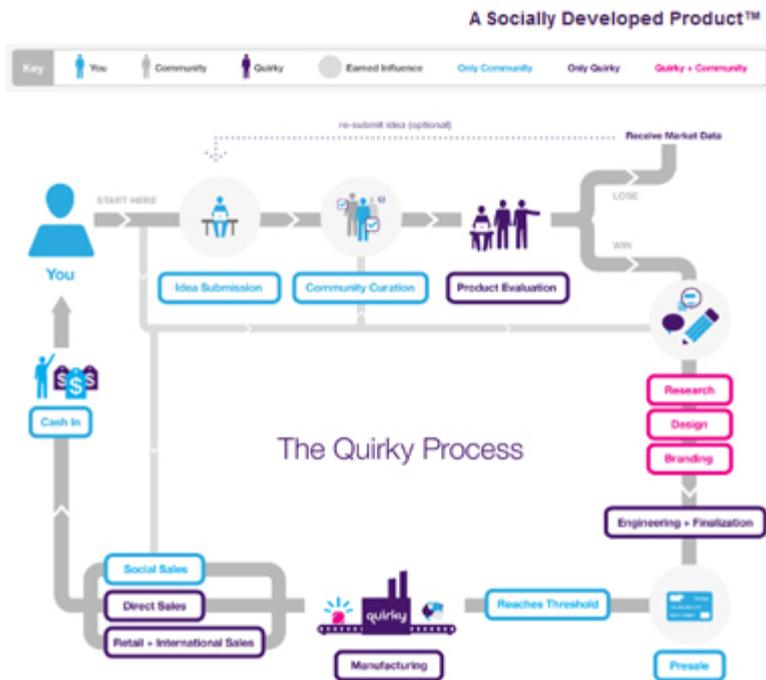
Everyone on the internet is an expert.

Need you friends' input on your online searches? Go to Bing.com. Want your brilliant invention fine-tuned? Post it to Quirky.com. Both sites tend to operate under the same premise of safety in numbers and comfort in crowds.

Crowds, however, are not always very wise. If we're all familiar with the adage about too many cooks in the kitchen, why would we subject our searches and designs to a large group?

Quirky.com, a website similar to [Kickstarter](#) [1], offers the opportunity for people to make their simple ideas into inventions. For ten dollars anyone can submit an idea, so long as it does not include integrated software or complex electronics, and the Quirky community votes on that idea, comments on its design, and helps create branding. A portion of the profits from the eventual products are proportionately divided among those who helped.

Most of the finished projects on Quirky are relatively inexpensive and elegantly simple solutions to everyday problems. While Quirky praises the benefits of the community—products designed by consumers for consumers—forum threads tell a very different story. Community members squabble with each other over original ideas, complain about being ripped off by other members, and lament how their original designs and ideas were degraded by the masses.



To a great extent, Quirky's emphasis on community makes a great deal of sense; if the purpose of the site is to allow "ordinary" people to invent, having the input of people with a variety of skills and expertise is helpful. Additionally, if the community has an interest in the design, execution, and success of a product, the community will, ideally, purchase the product and recommend the product to everyone they know. Yet even with a community of over 200,000 members, Quirky's products are not exactly flying off shelves. The products, in actuality, remain designed by a very specific for an even smaller group.

Even search engines have become a social experience. Revamped a couple of months ago, Bing.com's "social search" option allows users to share their queries with their Facebook friends and select experts. While the decision to share searches is at the discretion of the online user, the idea of Bing social plays into the need divulge every detail on Facebook and Twitter where relationships, political views, eating habits, and nonsensical opinions are all validated in a community setting via comments, likes, and (re)tweets.

Bing's social search, on the other hand, is unnecessarily narcissistic. I would rather not allow my Facebook acquaintances a front-row seat to my private life, including my internet searches. Take one of Bing's recent commercials to promote its social search option:

Video of xSwoZMmf_xY

What does the commercial tell me? With Bing, my wedding day, an incredibly personal day that ought to be tailored to me and my fiancé, becomes coopted by my friends. One friend publically suggests her uncle's farm, another demands I use an acquaintance's band.

While I have never planned a wedding, I have seen enough be planned to know how

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

disastrous it is to turn down a suggestion from a close friend or family member. I admit, it is difficult to not take it personally when someone rejects your opinion. Now with Bing, the insult will become even more public; however, I suppose this is not problematic for someone consistently posting to Facebook and Twitter.

The larger problem with Bing's social search lies in its sound logic. You choose your friends because they are similar to you; therefore, your friends' opinions and decisions will be similar to yours. It is certainly true that I value my friends' opinions, but I would never want to limit my decisions to the homogenous tastes and preferences of my friends. Whereas Quirky engages strangers, experts and amateurs alike, for the purpose of the best-designed product, Bing provides yet another platform for users to encounter the same opinions and judgments time and time again.

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[1] <http://www.ecnmag.com/articles/2012/06/kickstarter-helpful-website-or-project-killer>