



The Curious Case Of Imitators

by sanjay badhe

COPYCATS HOW SMART COMPANIES USE IMITATION TO GAIN A STRATEGIC EDGE
 BY ODED SHENKAR; HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS; PAGES: 256; PRICE: \$29.95

'BUILD A BETTER MOUSE TRAP, THE WORLD WILL beat a path to your doorstep' is the popular refrain among people across spheres such as arts, science, business, product development, etc. But no one has ever said: "Copy a successful mousetrap, put a lot of effort into the copying of it (understand the mouse, its habits, the makers of the trap, how they codified and developed it, the attributes of the bait, etc.). While doing so, improve it, make it better. And, equally important, don't be shy — as we are when copying." Oded Shenkar's **COPYCATS** says just that. To this end, it even invents a new word 'imovators' — combining imitators and innovators.

So, how exactly did Shenkar develop his theory? Well, it starts with an astute observation of nature and biology. With a lot of persuasive evidence, Shenkar says nature teaches all of us to copy. All our learning comes from imitation. For instance, infants ape adults. But as we grow older, imitation (the "i word") is frowned upon.

Across industries and segments, imitation may not be a good word. But innovation is. It is seen as the noble and right way of doing things. That explains the rush to make innovation the mother's milk of most organisations. However, Shenkar believes imitating is more critical. It is also not an easy thing to do. This does not mean he is in favour of cheap or illegal imitations or for superficially copying a success. For example, half a dozen airlines across the world have imitated the low-cost operations of the US-based Southwest Airlines. That's not the case here.

Shenkar sees imitation as a complex process.

He demolishes the much-touted 'first-mover advantage' citing a slew of examples: Netscape being pushed back by Windows Explorer; Chrysler's Minivan overtaken by Ford and GM and then by Honda and Toyota. These examples show that being second or third in line meant being better prepared and ensured the 'copies' overtook the first mover. They also understood the consumer, added innovations to the imitation to help meet consumer needs and launched improved versions quickly. They often spent less on R&D than the initial innovator.

However, the road to imitation and imovation, cautions Shenkar, is a tough one. Merely copying features or looks is not enough. Good imovators have the methods and processes in place that need as much rigour as does innovation. The book describes a fairly detailed methodology, which involves steps such as getting ready for imitation by building a culture for it, referencing where targets are identified, searching, spotting and sorting ideas, contextualising, deep-diving (an in-depth investigation), and implementing.

Does this work? Consider this: on patent expiration in the drug industry, copycat generics have reduced considerably the time taken to capture significant market share from original brands. In the 1990s, cardiovascular drug Cardizem lost 80 per cent of its market share to generics five years from patent expiration; a decade later, anti-high-BP drug Cardura (Pfizer) lost the same share in less than nine months; antidepressant Prozac (Eli Lilly) lost this in less than two months. So, as the life cycle of products drops and product development and R&D costs increase, imitation and its more acceptable cousin, imovation, might well become the alternatives. And while Shenkar does mention

that costs are now not low for these (in some instances imovation hits 70 per cent of innovations costs in R&D and product development), the idea is intriguing. Will organisations set up imitation and imovation departments?



BROWSING
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Currently, I am reading *Winning* by JACK WELCH. I recently read *The Argumentative Indian* by Amartya Sen. I would recommend *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* by Robin Sharma and *Who Moved My Cheese* by Spencer Johnson to all leaders. While travelling, I read books such as *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. My bookshelf includes authors such as Khushwant Singh, Jhumpa Lahiri and Steven Covey.



ODED SHENKAR is Ford Motor Company Chair in Global Business Management and professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business. Shenkar's research interests include international business and management. He is the editor of several books, most recently the *Handbook For International Management Research and International Business*.