**Turning Customers Into Creators**

**By** [**JENNA WORTHAM**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/jenna_wortham/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

A FEW young women are gathered around a conference table dotted with bottles of colorful vitamin drinks, [iPod](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/i/ipod/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) cables and slender laptops. A whiteboard with lime-green writing almost swallows a wall in the room.

One bites her lip; another taps lightly on the table. They’re all quiet, deep in thought, as they decide whether it would be a good idea to add a music feature to the Web site they’re working on — a new online shopping site called [PlumWillow](http://plumwillow.com/).

“The problem,” says one of them, Sarah Murphy, “is that there are so many genres of music that it’d be hard to get it right what people want to listen to.”

“Right,” Carla Larin concurs, tossing her wavy brown hair. “But it’d be cool to have, like, a PlumWillow station full of songs we think are cool.”

None of these girls are the company’s founders, nor are they social media consultants. They aren’t at PlumWillow’s office for “take your daughter to work day,” either.

Rather, they’re part of a team of 15- and 16-year-old interns who are being tapped for their own special brand of expertise and insight: a bird’s-eye view into the life and mind of high school teenagers, exactly the audience that PlumWillow is seeking.

“They definitely aren’t shy about telling us what they like and don’t like,” says Lindsay Anvik, director of marketing at PlumWillow, who helps oversee the internship program at its offices in Manhattan.

The interns are also emblematic of how Web-based businesses are doing more than merely shaping their products and services around customer preferences. The companies are corralling those customers in the workplace and making them part of the design and marketing process, according to Susan Etlinger, a consultant at the [Altimeter Group](http://www.altimetergroup.com/), which researches Web technologies and advises companies on how to use them.

Of course, search engines like [Google](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/google_inc/index.html?inline=nyt-org) and Bing have been racing to tailor their results to individual users, and [Facebook](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/facebook_inc/index.html?inline=nyt-org) is constantly tweaking its algorithm to show members’ updates and the Web links that are most relevant to them.

But what’s happening at PlumWillow is a sign of an even more intimate relationship between a company and its customers.

Moving beyond “the old-fashioned focus group and into co-creation with your demographic is something that will happen more in the next couple of years,” Ms. Etlinger says. “All business will have to learn how to cope with a new generation of users that are used to their particular experience of the Web.”

Because PlumWillow wants to be more than just an online shopping destination — it’s tackling the tricky challenge of recreating the experience of a gaggle of girls going to the mall — its success hinges on getting all the details right, down to the pop songs that girls want to hear while hunting for a new pair of slouchy ankle boots.

“The site needs to be authentic to their voice and how they shop,” says Charlie Federman, PlumWillow’s chairman, whose [venture capital](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/v/venture_capital/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) firm also led a round of seed funding in the company. “Adults trying to recreate that are just asking for trouble because these kids are smart and sophisticated and know when something is phony.”

The girls were initially brought on as a “sanity test,” Mr. Federman says. “We were all excited and talking about this great idea when we realized a wise thing to do would be to actually talk to some teen girls.”

Once the conversation began, the dynamic changed.

“It went from us talking to them to us listening to them,” says Scott Stone, co-founder and head of business development at PlumWillow. “We decided we might as well institutionalize it and make it part of our culture.”

Two days a week, Ms. Anvik and Tal Flanchraych, the product manager, grill the girls on all kinds of topics, asking whether the site’s comment system is too confusing, for example, or brainstorming about prizes for the site’s [Halloween](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/h/halloween/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) contest.

“Then we go back to our desks and regurgitate everything and think about how it fits into our future planning,” Ms. Flanchraych says.

Nearly 20 girls have cycled through the company since early this year, PlumWillow says.

They help keep the company nimble enough to catch and fix mistakes before they are pushed out to broader audiences, executives say.

“We watch what they click on, see what they do and how they use the site,” says Eric David Benari, another of the site’s founders and its chief technology officer. “It’s not something we can do virtually.”

It’s nothing new for companies to gather input from audiences they serve. Gap recently reverted to its boxy old logo after users complained about a new design. [Twitter](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/twitter/index.html?inline=nyt-org) famously formalized the shorthand of its users as the site began to balloon in popularity.

PlumWillow doesn’t want to wait until it hears — positively or negatively — from its customer. It wants customers in-house so it can always be ahead of the curve.

For PlumWillow, however, the trick is to find a balance between its own strategic direction and fickle consumer feedback.

“You don’t want to put a bunch of teenagers in charge of the site, but they are revealing the way they think about it, which can be extremely useful for a start-up,” says Josh Bernoff, an analyst at [Forrester Research](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/forrester-research-inc/index.html?inline=nyt-org). “If you go too far in one direction, you become like a politician pandering to its audience.”

FOR all the effort that the girls are putting into the site, what do they get in return? School credit and ripe material for college application essays, for starters.

But there may be something more in it for them. While many of their peers may spend their internships doing office work at various companies, the PlumWillow interns are getting a taste of the challenges of entrepreneurship.

“I loved seeing the whole process from start to finish,” Ms. Larin says. “Six months ago we were looking at PDFs of the site; now we have the live version that we helped create. It’s incredibly cool to see.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/business/24ping.html