Viewpoint

Hijacking the Voice of the Customer

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As the Front End of Innovation has achieved more prominence in Product Development, a controversy has emerged over the Voice of the Customer (VOC). At PDMA 2005 in San Diego, for instance, one speaker actually told the audience to "ignore the Voice of the Customer." In this viewpoint article, author Gerry Katz jumps into this debate countering that inflammatory statement and providing guidance on what is "true" VOC.

First, the good news: After more than a decade of evangelism by academics, consultants, and industry practitioners who have actively preached and proselytized its benefits, the Voice of the Customer (VOC) has finally come into its own as a best practice in New Product Development. And there is substantial data to support it. According to the PDMA Foundation's recent Comparative Performance Assessment Study (CPAS), VOC is now used by the vast majority of companies and on nearly half of all their Product Development projects. Furthermore, in an analysis of which variables separate the "best" performing Product Development companies from the "rest," VOC, in all its forms—customer interviews, ethnography, customer site visits, etc.—was shown to be one of the strongest discriminators.

Now for the bad news: The Voice of the Customer is increasingly being "hijacked" by a number of well-intentioned but misguided people to places it was never intended to go. It seems that the more pervasive VOC has become, the more it has been misdefined, misunderstood, and misapplied—and not just by lay people, but by acknowledged experts in the field of New Product Development.

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VOC misdefined

Many people—practitioners included—assume intuitively that Voice of the Customer simply means any type of primary market research that elicits input from customers. Actually, the definition of VOC is far narrower than that. Voice of the Customer refers specifically to the development of a detailed and prioritized set of customer wants and needs in support of new Product Development—that is, the design of new or improved products, services, or processes. VOC belongs at the very beginning of a new product initiative, the so-called "Fuzzy Front End" of innovation, in which the company attempts to define exactly what type of product or service it wishes to build.

Yet many people continue to use the term incorrectly. Even the PDMA itself has been guilty of misusing the term. In recent years, a number of our conferences about VOC have included presentations on such wayward topics as:

- Marketing mix analysis for mature brands;
- Data collection methodologies for advertising research; and
- The role of marketing research within the enterprise.

Most of these were excellent presentations. They just didn't have anything to do with the Voice of the Customer!

Misguided Black Belts

Another group of hijackers are those otherwise well-educated practitioners of Six Sigma—and in particular, its Product Development incarnation, Design for Six Sigma (DFSS). DFSS specifies the use of VOC in its proper place at the very Front End of the DMAIC process, and it is almost always done in one way or another. But many otherwise well-trained Black Belts have surprisingly little training or experience in gathering the VOC. Many naïvely go out and simply ask the customer, "What do you want?" This ironically, is just about the worst way to understand the customer's wants and needs because it implicitly asks the customer to identify the feature or solution they think will satisfy them.

In a recent issue of *iSixSigma Magazine* (July/August 2005), a highly regarded Six Sigma publication, a number of contributors asked the question, "Is VOC killing innovation?" One writer asserted, "VOC will never let you be any more creative than your customers." This statement demonstrates another common misunderstanding about VOC. In their groundbreaking 1993 paper on the topic, Abbie Griffin and John Hauser make clear the distinction between needs and solutions to needs—a concept which is perhaps the cornerstone of VOC and a distinction that every VOC practitioner clearly understands. Yet many DFSS practitioners too often make the mistake of asking the customer to give them the solution. And since most customers aren't all that creative, they simply play back what they already know; namely, those features and solutions that already exist in the marketplace. The result? Disappointing "me-too" products.

Of course, not everyone agrees. With some strong data to support his contention, well-known MIT Professor Eric von Hippel claims that many excellent solutions are, in fact, conceived and created by what he calls *lead users*, people who feel a need so intensely that they attempt to innovate on their own. Yet in practice, this leads to several additional problems: first, how to know who the real "lead users" are; and second, how to tell whether their solutions will be embraced by the wider market? In my experience, identifying which lead users to bet on can be a tricky and contentious problem for an organization, and has led to far more failures than successes. The bottom line is that even if you can successfully identify these lead users, it's still vitally important to understand their underlying needs and not just their pet solutions.

Trying to be different

In his recent book on this topic, *What Customers Want*, Tony Ulwick dismisses Voice of the Customer for a number of reasons. Among his

criticisms are that it produces needs and benefits that are just too vague to be useful to product developers—needs, such as "easy to use" or "reliable." And he's correct that this is an all too common problem. (He also correctly identifies the problem of implicitly asking the customer to provide their desired solutions or specifications.) The alternative? Ulwick advocates a focus on desired *outcomes*, a method he argues is different from traditional VOC.

But aren't needs, in fact, always either desired outcomes or an expressed wish that will lead to a desired outcome? Every experienced VOC practitioner knows that probing deeply into a customer's desired outcomes is one of the best ways to elicit customer needs and, in particular, to get down to the level of detail necessary for Product Development. Gaining an understanding of how the customer defines generalities like "easy to use" and "reliable" and trying to understand the job the customer is attempting to accomplish has been a part of VOC from the very beginning. Even back in 1993, Griffin and Hauser described a need as, "the benefit to be fulfilled by the product or service . . . what they assume or want the [product or service] to do for them." Sounds like a desired outcome to me!

As much work as I've done in this area, I'm afraid I still fail to understand the distinction here. I can only wonder whether perhaps the author is simply trying to differentiate his technique from others in the VOC marketplace. It's possible that Ulwick, like the rest of us, is merely trying to help "purify" VOC and is to be applauded for doing so. But call it what you want, it's still VOC to me!

Setting sparks flying

Undoubtedly, the biggest case of hijacking the VOC took place at this year's PDMA International Conference in San Diego. Keynoter Michael Treacy delivered a wonderfully provocative talk that trashed nearly a dozen sacred cows of New Product Development. In one of his most inflammatory examples, he proclaimed, "Ignore the Voice of the Customer! The customer is the dumbest guy in the room!"

Treacy went on to display a recently introduced multifunctional device that combined a cell phone, a PDA, remote e-mail, audio and video playback, digital camera, and more. He emphatically asserted, "Ten years ago, no customer could have told you a thing about this device!" But again, Treacy seems to be confusing *needs* with *solutions* to needs. He's absolutely right that a customer probably wouldn't have said that he or she wanted such a device, let alone have been able to describe it. But having done VOC work in this space back then, I can tell you quite authoritatively that once each of these capabilities became available, people in VOC interviews began to complain about being tethered to a fixed location; and once these devices became portable, about the difficulty in carrying all of them around.

Customers usually aren't very good at describing solutions. But when properly asked, they're very good at describing their needs—what they like, what they don't like, what makes their lives hard or easy, what they wish for, and what they're trying to get done (desired outcomes again!). But of course, it's not the customer's job to come up with the solution—that's the developer's job. Their job is just to articulate their needs.

To be fair, Treacy subsequently did refer to the need to focus on the customer's *functional* objectives as opposed to the technologies that might be used to address them, which seems to me to be quite analogous to the distinction between needs and solutions. But he seems to misunderstand the Voice of the Customer, again assuming that we should ask the customer what they want and expect them to hand us the solution—right down to the exact features and specifications we need to design a winning new product.

Treacy was an engaging speaker; and if all he was trying to do was to create some controversy, he surely succeeded. The sparks were flying after his talk, and the conference was all abuzz. But this was definitely a hijacking of the most dramatic kind!

Taking back control of the VOC

Those of us who are actively engaged in the process of gathering the Voice of the Customer—academics, consultants, and clients alike—already know these things. We are all essentially singing from the same hymnal. We may at times be singing slightly different tunes and be singing in slightly different keys, but we all want to better understand customers' real underlying needs in order to help create better new products and services. The evidence in support of VOC is growing stronger year by year, and I doubt that its use is going to be derailed any time soon. So, let's take back control of the ship. Let's all resolve to define VOC correctly and to make sure that all practitioners gather it using systematic, proven techniques. After all, we're all trying to get to the same destination, aren't we?

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