WHITE PAPER

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Organizing for Customer Empathy

Subject:
Customer & Patient Empathy

Revision:
February 14, 2012

Contact:
Mark Roser 860-228-6728

Empathy in a nutshell

Facilitating large team sessions, we often need to ensure people are sincerely listening to each others' ideas – so we ask them "*Are you really listening, or are you quietly waiting for your turn to talk?*" Different people have different levels of capacity for sincere listening. Some people simply want to share their concepts and talk, while some are more willing to stay quiet and give their undivided attention to what the other is saying. So it is with big organizations. Some companies like to broadcast their point and promote their products, while some organizations work very hard to better understand the customer and listen to their spoken and unspoken needs. This is empathy – the willingness to both understand the facts and feel the emotions of the person you are with.

Speaking with Lou – about how he decides about whether to take his prescription diabetes medication

But, who 'owns' the customer???

When your organization sets off to develop a hot new product concept – who takes responsibility for articulating the needs of the customer? Is it marketing's role, product management's role, sales' role or R&D's role? As we have found in many organizations, there is often an implicit hierarchy of ownership that is counterproductive to great new product/service design.

In some companies, there is almost no customer ownership beyond the sales force. A leading personal computer company admits that in their recent past, problems and complaints within one model line took 18 months to make it from the service organization through the various channels before it reached engineering. This meant that a fix would not show up until two model lines later!

To attain peak new products, everyone has to share a role in owning the customer relationship. However, even with the best intentions, this can be hard to accomplish.

Take the example of a global life sciences company with a significant R&D organization that is charged with bringing new drug therapies to market. Their scientists were eager to establish a patient visit program for the growing metabolic syndrome market and meet directly with patients and their doctors to understand the disease.

When the marketing organization heard about the activity, they quickly wanted to take part in the process, and help organize the activity. They wanted to re-shape the activity to bring in nationally recognized medical authorities on the subject who could speak on behalf of all patients.

When the sales organization heard of the activity, they also wanted to take part in the activity. They saw this as an opportunity to build rapport with key market influencers in this area of medicine. As a result, sales wished to re-shape the activity to bring in regionally influential hospital and university doctors who were held in high regard by others in the local medical community.

Three constituents – each with their own agendas: research scientists wanted unfettered access to diverse patients, marketing wanted to stick with key opinion leaders, and sales wanted to establish rapport with regional influencers. Without proper organization for empathy, the stale-mate failed to be resolved and the program died before even getting delivered.

Key Words:
Cost-Constrained
Innovation
Empathy
Listening
Patient visits
Customer visits
Empathic Research

Defining roles for empathic customer understanding

For great ideas to come to life, organizations need to facilitate interactions that provide greater depth than what is available in traditional market research and focus groups. As Seth Godin explains, companies need to include traditional research to gain basic market understanding, but need more customer intimacy to gain a true empathic appreciation of the customer.

Through organizing for empathy, companies can better predict unspoken customer desires and recognize patterns before they emerge into official trends. At the pinnacle of success are companies who have reached a stage of relationship granted by their customers, who eagerly await the company's new offerings and offer unfettered feedback during the design phase.

So, how can ownership of the customer best be divided to maximize the likelihood you will discover the next big thing? Below is a potential framework to consider as a starting point.

Marketing: Owns the detailed quantitative and qualitative research data associated with the markets the company plays in. They must be masters of spoken customer needs, and be able to statistically understand and compare feedback regarding potential new product improvements. They own the analysis.

Sales: Owns the direct customer interface and is often closest to the daily requests, complaints and musings of the customer. They must be masters of "street" intelligence, competitive rumors and customer reactions to product launches. They own the relationship.


In a patient's living room, the ideal location for conversation, where open-ended dialog uncovers perspective beyond data.

Service / Warranty / Channel Management: Groups that oversee product problems have a unique perspective on the customer, their frustrations, their expectations, and their opinion of the marketplace. They own the scorecard of today's products.

R&D / Engineering: Is the downstream recipient of sales and marketing information, but first in translating it into value. They must be masters of customer relevance, and be able to decipher the signal from the noise found to illuminate specific ways in which today's products can be improved and tomorrow's products can be re-invented. They own the translation of data to specification.

These hypothetical boundaries help divide responsibility, but also help illuminate the fact that no single group owns the entire customer experience; it is essential that we collaborate.

Organizing for Empathy

"…it created a safe space for colleagues to work alongside each other and gather context and feedback at the early stages of design, when the cost of experimentation was cheaper, and the future product could be shaped to meet their vision…"

Excellent organizations rely upon cross-functional shared ownership of innovation processes; a senior figure endorses their activity. They support exploratory customer activities and pursue hidden customer insights. Sometimes the group is an innovation council, sometimes an advanced product development group, sometimes a growth task-force.

These special teams bring colleagues in direct and unmediated contact with customers to help uncover the true unspoken voice of the customer. Visits are frequently scheduled before a meal, so that the team can sit, eat and reflect together after their session. Longer visits can span several days. Examples of or this include:

A major manufacturer of industrial products sent a team to "live" in their customers' shoes for several days to work, eat and get things done alongside their customer to do more than talk about things that were important to them.

A leading US pharmacy chain sent its people on exploratory trips to 4 continents to understand how prescriptions were dispensed in other countries and cultures.

A global consumer products firm sent a team to visit people in their homes to understand how they got their houses clean, who did the work, and how it impacted their daily routine.

A life-sciences company working in the field of Alzheimer's research sent diverse teams to eat lunch with patients at nursing homes, meet with administrators, interview doctors, talk with nurses, and have dinner with adult family members of Alzheimer's patients.

These activities were bold for each of these companies, and set new precedents for customer contact. Each of the companies illuminated insights that helped re-shape their approach to that market.

The benefits of the contact were also magnified because it created a safe space for colleagues to work alongside each other, gather context and share in each other's perceptions. Feedback from these sessions was able to be integrated at the early stages of design, when the cost of experimentation was cheaper, and the future product could be shaped to align with the customer's vision.

SUMMARY

Organizing for empathy fosters increased contact with patients & customers that nurtures both external customer relationships as well as internal research & development.

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