

## MARKITEK – Marketing Consultants / 2008

### WHY YOUR CUSTOMERS DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY WANT

When it comes to determining what products to build, or which enhancements to add to existing products, marketers use a variety of tools: focus groups, customer surveys, secondary research, competitive analyses and so on. All of which focus on answering what seems at first to be a perfect question: "what does our marketplace want?"

From there, it's a process of tallying responses, seeing who wants the same thing most often, and then heading off to building it. (OK, a slightly simplified version of the process--by not unrealistic nevertheless.)

Seems like such a good idea. Turn your customers into your marketing department, have them tell you what to build, and you're done. Clean, fast and above all simple.

Only problem is . . . it's the wrong question to begin with.

Your customers are not the right people to tell you what they want. "What do customers want" is very much a marketing question, and it needs to be answered by people who understand marketing. Your customers don't.

In the end, your customers don't know what they want: people are, by nature, non-analytical about themselves. They aren't self-perceptive enough to really be able to answer that question. It's just too big a question and requires too much objectivity.

The answer to "what do you want" is often driven by their most recent experience. If someone's seven year old dropped the mustard bottle yesterday and it broke on the kitchen floor, what that person wants is a plastic mustard bottle. But ask again in a couple of weeks and you're going to hear they want more variety or a larger jar.

Am I suggesting that your customers don't figure into the product development process? Of course not. What I am suggesting is that you have to approach that vital research phase with a different question altogether: one that will get the kind of response you need.

You need to ask them "What do you do?"

Very much a different question. Instead of putting them in the role of marketer, trying to get them to do your work for you by defining new and profitable product features, what you should be doing is getting them to simply take you through their experience with your product and with products that provide the same value yours does.

It's their experience within that context that will tell you what you need to do to continually provide better value to them. By listening carefully, asking good questions and helping guide them to good answers, you will develop a quality picture of what their experience is. And from that you will be able to determine what you can offer to make that experience better for them.

In short, you learn a lot more about your customers by analyzing their behavior than by picking their brains.

Take a really simple example: sandwich bread.

Play along here. Ask yourself what you *want* from a loaf of bread. More types of raisin bread? Larger loafs? Smaller loafs? Lower prices?

OK. Now ask yourself the other question. Ask yourself what you *do* with your loaf of bread.

Here's *my* sandwich bread experience

Simply getting it home from the store in good condition requires some thought and planning--how do I keep it from getting squished into the shape of a Henry Moore sculpture as I load it into my car. Waste is an issue, since I'm going to be throwing out old loaves, either because I'm down to pieces my kids won't eat or some of the bread has gone stale. I then have to build sandwiches to specific requirements (one of mine likes it cut diagonally, the other vertically with no crust). A big issue hits me when I have to make sure that they're packed up for school in such a way that the Geography book doesn't mush them. I also have to then deal with resealing the loaf package (I lose the plastic clips quickly) so they don't go stale and they don't get destroyed in my pantry.

So I've really got a lot of issues here to deal with: logistics, spoilage, repackaging, repurposing, customization, inventory . . . and others. When you asked yourself "what do I want" from a loaf of bread, how many of those issues did you raise?

But now that we've asked the "what do we do" questions, we find there are a whole lot of opportunities to satisfy customer needs--and very few of them have to do with bread. But all of them have to do with your customer, which is where your focus needs to be of course. Consider these possibilities:

- Providing a crush proof package.
- Providing a branded, plastic breadbox.
- Providing a sandwich carrier for school lunches.
- Providing precut loaves
- Removing crusts
- Providing better sealing packages (a "ziplock" bag for bread)
- Removing the end pieces or slicing them up for use as bread crumbs.

Are these worth doing? I don't know. That's a question for further research, and it's a business question as well. Would the cost of building a crust-removing machine be recoverable in a reasonable period of time? Would precut loaves really make a difference? Can you really package a loaf of bread without end pieces?

You of course face all these issues. And you'll find a few of them through traditional "what do you want" market analysis. But, we suggest, you'll find *all* of them through "what do you do" analysis.