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trekking

a newsletter on practical strategic thinking and action
issue #35: to which voice of the customer are you listening?

editor's message

We have had a number of conversations lately that went something like this:

Company: "We're trying to figure out what to do about [a change in the marketplace and/or technology]"

Trek: "How will this affect your customers—why don't you ask them?"

Company: "We already do Voice of the Customer."

Trek: "But do you ask about this?"

Company: "No, that's not the kind of thing we ask..."

And there it ends. To these companies, the voice of their customers has been boxed into a once-a-year survey that someone else in the organization handles. Obligation completed, they "spoke" with their customers.

These experiences have led us to the conclusion that this powerful tool has become yesterday's news and lost its strategic value to many companies. So we thought we would share some ideas on how to boost Voice of the Customer efforts, whether or not you use this term to describe them. In *Strategic Thinking* we talk about how to leverage customer conversations for smarter strategy, and in *Strategic Action* we give you some advice on how to get the best information possible out of the conversations. Our *Industry Snapshot* rants on the disappearance of pretzels in coach class, and the *Reading List* reviews *Made to Stick*.

strategic thinking

Tapping into the Strategic Voice of Your Customer

Most people associate Voice of the Customer (VoC) with the Six Sigma movement. Although talking to your customers wasn't invented that recently(!), VoC is certainly the kind of simple but powerful idea that characterizes Six Sigma.

The basic idea underlying VoC, as Drucker said, 'it is the customer who signs your paycheck.' Anything you do has to make sense to, and create value for, a customer. So you have to focus on today's needs—and tomorrow's needs as well.

Can your customers tell you what their future needs are? Not directly. But they can talk to you about where their business is going, how their market is changing, and even how your competitors are developing—but you have to ask them. That's what's really interesting—your business lies at the intersection between the customer's needs and your organization's abilities. You bring something special to

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fresh information. smarter decisions. great results.



the conversation about your client's changing needs. You will see things that they won't. That's why you are in business. That's how you stay in business—by staying in touch with your market and adapting to it.

Too often, conversations with customers get stuck in a box (like the VoC) and stuck in the present. We applaud any company that spends time to speak directly to its clients. But we see the real winners spending the time to move those conversations to a higher level. Read on for some ideas on how to do that.

-Mary Adams (adams@trekconsulting.com)

strategic action

Listening to the Voice of Your Customer

Our favorite way to tap into the knowledge of clients' customers is through what we call "strategic conversations." While there is a place for surveys and polls, if you are trying to make the kind of fundamental changes in which we often are involved, cold data doesn't fit the bill. Plus, if you ask closed questions, you are limiting your client to the set of answers that you design—and a lot of what you should be looking for are the answers that you can't design or foresee. That's why there is often no substitute for high quality, and hopefully, face-to-face conversation based on open questions.

This kind of question moves beyond today and beyond the direct product or service relationship with the customer. Usually, all you need are some powerful questions to get the ball rolling such as:

- What is your biggest business challenge going forward?
- What are the most important trends you see affecting your business and industry?
- What do you think you have to do to stay competitive?
- What role will technology play in future changes?
- Are there technologies or products that you use that you wish were more compatible with our product?
- Do you use (or are aware of) competing products/services to ours? What do you see as the key differences?
- Are there areas where our company could make a change or enhance a service to help you accomplish your goals?
- How could we serve you better?

I'll add one proviso. Lately we have had some great luck with the combination interview used with IC Rating (www.icrating.com). These use a standard format for questions that contribute to the rating of the company's intangibles. But we also



follow up with open questions to get behind the rating—such as, “Why is that?” Anonymous excerpts from these comments can get inside people’s heads much better than data—it’s like they hear (dare I say it) the voice of their customer...

- *Michael Oleksak (oleksak@trekconsulting.com)*

industry snapshot

Can't We Have the Pretzels Back?

Having flown on several flights for a business trip tacked onto February vacation, I have only one request. Please bring back the pretzels.

For some reason, on one of the flights, I actually listened to the flight attendant as he welcomed us on board. He told us how he wanted to make our flight as pleasant as possible. This was my fourth flight in less than 24 hours. So it didn't ring very true to me. I looked around to see if anyone saw the irony in his comments. Most people probably tuned him out from the beginning.

Depending on how old you are, you may remember that in coach you used to get cloth napkins and real silverware with your meal—yes, I said meal. Then we went disposable. Then we went to “light” meals. Now we are down to soft drinks. No peanuts (too many people with allergies) and no pretzels. It's like being on a bread and water diet without the bread.

The message from the airlines is that we all have to pay because no one has figured out how to make a profit at this business. As a customer, I'm not impressed.

reading list

Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die

By Chip Heath & Dan Heath

The jacket cover of this book is embossed to look like it has a jagged piece of duct tape stuck on it. This image tells you a lot about the communication strategies that these brothers and co-authors espouse—that ideas that succeed are easy to understand and memorable. One of the most powerful concepts they outline is the “curse of knowledge”—that what we know gets in the way of our ability to communicate what is really important. They break through this curse with six principles for sticky ideas:

- Simple
- Unexpected
- Concrete



- Credible
- Emotional
- Stories

There is no way to summarize the many, many great stories in this book that help you understand and remember these concepts. There isn't a businessperson around who wouldn't benefit from this book.

To learn more about this book, visit the authors' website (www.madetostick.com).

announcements

Here is a program that every one of our readers should attend:

Direct Connections:

Help Prospects Find You (and Your Clients) Using Web 2.0

Thursday, March 15, 2007 @ 6:00 pm

Hilton Garden Inn, Waltham, MA

Mary Adams saw the panel leader, Kathleen Gilroy of the Otter Group, last year and was blown away by her energy and the results she has achieved for her clients. Web 2.0 is changing the way companies connect with their marketplaces. At a minimum, we all need to understand Web 2.0. Why not take it to the next step and profit from it too? If you are interested, you learn more about this program by visiting the IMCNE Events Calendar (<http://imcne.org/events/2007/mar1507.html>).

There is also a Bonus Workshop before the program at 5:00 pm sharp entitled: "Using Assessment Tools to Generate Revenue and Add-on Business" that is a must-see for consultants.

If you would like to go as our guest, contact us at adams@trekconsulting.com and we'll take care of it for you.

Because of the Web 2.0 program this week (are you going?), we decided to postpone the topic we had promised for this month: "The Implications of Web 2.0 on the Role of Management." But next month's issue should be even better after we "get smart" with the help of IMCNE and their invited panelists.



about trek consulting

Trek Consulting LLC helps companies to face the challenges of growth, building value and dealing with change. Since 1999, we have been a valued partner to business owners and leaders on their arduous journey to business success. We know that we cannot make this journey for our clients, but we can make it easier and more successful. We focus on getting you the best information available, facilitating sound planning and decision-making, making sure you have the right skills and resources to face your challenge, and coaching you through the road-blocks that invariably arise along the way.

Our clients report improved market focus, greater revenues, better margins and increased profits. To learn more about Trek Consulting and how we can help you improve your company's results, visit us on the web at www.trekconsulting.com or call us at 781-729-1008.