LISTENING TO WHAT YOUR CUSTOMER DOESN'T SAY

By Neale Martin

> ... Listening to what your customer isn't saying relies on a longitudinal approach where insights are built over time...

NOT only are customers not always right, they lie. You ask them what they want; you get it for them, then they don't want it. The stuff they told you they don't want, they buy from your competitor. And no matter how much you satisfy them; they will switch brands and stores in a heartbeat. Sometimes your customers lie on purpose, but most of the time they don't tell you the truth because they don't know the truth.

Recent research shows that the vast majority of customer behavior is controlled by the unconscious mind. So, when you ask your customers what they want or how satisfied they are, the only part of their mind to which they have access is the part of the brain that contributes only a tiny amount to what they actually do. The bulk of their behavior is controlled by a part of the brain they can't consciously examine. To truly understand your customer, you have to listen hardest to what they don't say—you have to listen to what they do.

An example of this is found in research for new product introductions. Whether my client makes soup or cell phones, they use complex and expensive market research to bring new products to market. A part of this process involves asking subjects how likely they are to purchase the new product. The 'product' will range from a description to an actual prototype. Researchers will explain product features, especially where the new product is superior to existing products, and then ask subjects how likely they are to buy.

Invariably, these companies set a high threshold of positive responses before they will commit to the expense of bringing out a new product. Most set a hurdle of 85% or 90% of respondents saying they would 'definitely' or 'probably' purchase before they launch. These clients report that even when they get positive responses above 90%, usually only 4% or 5% of those respondents end up buying the product. Explaining this gap is easy; closing it is difficult.

Being in an experimental condition activates the conscious mind of the subject leading to a purely rational response. The marketer is likely to present his new product as superior and highlight the features and benefits that separate new

from existing. This further focuses the executive mind, leading the subject to rationally consider the alternatives and reach a logical conclusion: if the new product has superior features and benefits and a good price, of course they would buy it.

In the real world, this same individual will experience a new product quite differently—she will probably not notice it at all. Most customer purchases are not made through deliberation, but unconsciously out of habit. When a new product shows up, it must do more than appeal to the rational mind of the customer; it must break the customer's existing habits. And anyone who has ever tried to break a habit knows how hard that is.

The same process occurs when we try and get customer satisfaction information or do focus groups. Despite our best efforts, the information we get tracks poorly with reality. In the case of customer satisfaction, no matter the rating, we learn little about future behavior. Focus groups have their use, but are so variable that it is difficult to know what information is useful and what is fanciful.

Closing the gap involves a disciplined process that does not neglect executive decision-making, but combines these insights with behavioral observation. This process is more than just hiring an anthropologist to do an occasional study. It is a systematic method of observing customers in natural environments and tracking behaviors using databases.

Listening to what your customer isn't saying relies on a longitudinal approach where insights are built over time. To understand your customers' unconscious habits, you must understand the process that builds them. Tracking this information over time allows marketers to understand how changes in product features, advertising, distribution channels, and pricing affect actual customer behavior.

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