

The logo for Marketing Partners, Inc. is a red square with the text "Marketing Partners" in white, stacked vertically, and "INC" in a smaller font below it. The square is framed by thin black lines on the top, bottom, and right sides, with a vertical line extending downwards from the bottom center.

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Non-Traditional Approaches to Customer Understanding

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"Remarkable marketing is the art of building things worth noticing right into your product or service...understanding from the outset that if your offering itself isn't remarkable, then it's invisible -- no matter how much you spend on well-crafted advertising."

Seth Godin
Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable

Today, more than ever, successful marketers must rely upon creating a clear difference between themselves and the competition to succeed. Yet, many traditional means of differentiation are no longer viable in today's marketplace.

Proliferation, fragmentation and increasing affordability of advertising media have made achieving, much less sustaining, a dominant share-of-voice or brand image increasingly difficult. Availability or pricing advantages are virtually impossible to sustain.

Today the only viable differentiator is to be truly, remarkably and substantively different from your competition.

To create such products, then, requires tools that are truly, remarkably and substantively different from what you've been used to using.

Old tools, old results

Many of the traditional tools marketers employ to be customer-driven—focus groups, surveys, product tests, etc.—have become less and less useful in today's competitive environment.

Standard methods produce standard results

Traditional tools like surveys and focus groups have become so standardized that the information they provide has also become standardized. Your competition is using these tools; chances are they are asking the same kinds of questions you'd ask in your research. Is it any wonder, then, that everyone comes up with the same "insights" and ideas?

Consumers have become “trained” respondents

It is a rare customer today who hasn't taken a survey, participated in a group or been part of a product test. As a result, participants may be more likely to, even if subconsciously, try to 'steer' their responses in the 'right' direction. Also, the very fact that they have agreed to participate in a test or survey may make those customers less representative of the population in general.

Customers like to appear rational

Most people prefer to be seen as reasonable and sensible. Thus, most customers tend to 'reason out' their answers rather than being spontaneous. They also tend to provide socially acceptable answers when at all possible. Yet, as we all know, people often act in ways or believe in things that are anything but rational and socially acceptable.

Organizations are risk averse

High costs, coupled with low odds of success, have made many organizations very risk averse regarding product development. Standard research tools are often misappropriated into means to stay well inside the corporate comfort zone, becoming rationale for conservatism and conformity. How often have we heard, "It didn't score well..." as an excuse for killing an idea?

Artificial environments may produce artificial results

In physics, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle in effect states that precise measurements are impossible because the very act of measuring will influence the results. Most traditional customer research approaches are artificial and synthetic.

Choices made on a survey poorly reflect real purchase behavior. Customers being interviewed are in a significantly different mindset than they might take into a store.

Cutting edge ideas come from cutting edge tools

The word has always been that marketers and manufacturers must “get out of the box.”

Today that’s not enough.

You need to explode the box; then pick up each piece and examine it carefully for each is a clue to what you should or could be doing different from the competition.

So how do you explode the box?

Voice of the Customer

Using in-depth, one-on-one interviews, but concentrating on *product usage situations and functions*, Voice of the Customer uncovers implicit as well as explicit needs of consumers.

For example, rather than asking consumers about a new picnic cooler, a VOC approach focuses on various ways they transport and store food in various situations. The result is rich and different information about how people fulfill this need and function: e.g., knapsacks, luggage, bags with handles, backpacks. Framing the function or activity in “normal” and “abnormal” situations provides even richer understanding.

Empathic Design

Among the most potent techniques are those that have *observation* at their foundation. An example of the power of observation is a product development approach called Empathic Design. Watching consumers use *and misuse* products in their natural and native environments—unlike in lab tests or focus groups—provides at least five types of information that you can't get with traditional tools:

- *Triggers of Use*—How consumers often use a product in creative and unexpected ways.
- *Interaction with the Environment*—How products fit into the users' actual environment and normal—or even idiosyncratic—routines.
- *User Customization*—How users modify or adapt your product to their own uses and purposes.
- *Intangible Product Attributes*—Attributes that provide customers a strong emotional or sensory attachment to a product or idea.
- *Unarticulated Needs*—The real problems and needs of customers that they either don't know can be addressed or may not even see as problems.

For example, only by going into the field and actually observing users, did the makers of Cheerios find that their product was carried around by young mothers, ready at any time to be doled out as a snack or reward to a restless toddler.

Kansei Analysis

Kansei in Japanese means “sensitivity,” and this technique focuses on understanding customers' *emotional feelings and sensitivities*. Combining observational approaches and rigorous statistical analyses, Kansei measures aspects of products that customers rarely can clearly articulate—concepts such as elegance, femininity, style or trendiness.

Lead Users

In his book, *The Sources of Innovation*, Eric von Hippel notes that most consumers are ill-suited for new idea research because their familiarity and comfort with products limits their ability to provide useful insights. Product developers must, he says, seek out *lead users* as subjects.

Lead users are those users: who are ahead of the market because they face needs today that the bulk of the market may not encounter for months or years; and, who stand to benefit significantly, either professionally, socially or financially by meeting those needs. By observing and interacting with these customers, a developer can often discern needs and solutions months, if not years, ahead of the competition.

Exploding the Box

These are just a handful of the cutting-edge techniques that a product developer or marketer can use. Many other tools, such as laddering, thematic apperception, role-playing and others also offer significant opportunities for real customer insight and real product differentiation.

The best tools share many very important, and common dimensions that make them effective:

Observation focused on the customer experience

Most of these approaches depend heavily on watching what people do rather than what they say they do. As Willard Zangwill notes in his book *Lightning Strategies for Innovation*, “Be careful about listening to customers, because they are often wrong.”

Why? Because what we say is usually more rational than what we do. But, purchase decisions are very rarely completely reasoned and rational.

In *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage*, James Gilmore and Joseph Pine assert that traditional products must set themselves apart by understanding and exploiting the “experience that is wrapped around” using those products.

Whirlpool Corporation understood this when they needed their sales force to better understand how Whirlpool customers used and perceived the appliances built by the company. Instead of traditional training, they assigned those sales people to live together, commune-style, in a suburban home. For nine weeks, they used all of the company’s products, under a variety of conditions and situations, on a daily basis gaining an empathetic understanding of the consumer rare in the industry.

Non-directed questioning and focused listening

The best of these techniques rarely ask consumers direct questions. Instead, they provide users knowledge and understanding through inference. Customers describing situations, projecting images and usage onto role models or role-playing by customer and product developers themselves often provide deeper understanding than direct questioning.

This puts a premium on better listening techniques as the best ideas and solutions are often *overheard* rather than *heard*.

Continuously “Up-Close and Personal”

Building intimate understanding of customers cannot be a once-in-a-while effort. Truly effective product developers speak, observe and interact with customers directly on a regular basis. The semi-annual customer satisfaction survey, while focused on products, rarely provides much insight. “Touches” with customers, whether through field studies, mystery shopping or in-home observation, need to be ongoing.

Furthermore, everyone involved in idea creation and product development must immerse themselves in this process. Customer knowledge gained third-hand, from a research report, written by an analyst, who worked from notes or charts generated by a statistician who processed a database collected by a hourly telephone interviewer is hardly working on the front lines.

Both sides of the brain

People use all of their brains, from rational left side to sensory, artistic right side, to make product judgments and decisions—the best methods recognize that fact and make use of it. A research program which fails to acknowledge all of a customer’s sensibilities—sensory, rational and emotional—will fail, at some level, in uncovering all of a product’s differentiation potential.

Multi-disciplinary

To paraphrase Georges Clemenceau, “Product development is too important to leave to marketing.” Truly effective product development combines the collaborative efforts of many disciplines and departments and customer understanding must be drawn from each of these perspectives. Observing a particular behavior is likely to spark far different insights from a salesman than from an engineer. Unless both—and probably

many others—are involved in collecting and interpreting customer knowledge, at least one perspective will get lost.

Intense Customer Focus—Bringing it all Together

At Marketing Partners, we have brought many of these techniques together in an approach we call Intense Customer Focus. Intense Customer Focus (ICF) is a structured, multi-disciplinary team approach to idea and product development and marketing.

This approach is designed to provide a positive, innovative atmosphere for the organization and a continuous stream of ideas and innovations, rather than focusing on ideas on an ad hoc product-by-product, project-by-project basis.

Permanent, cross-functional teams are established to identify consumer needs (using many of the techniques described in this paper); create and evaluate ideas and innovations; and, then, manage them through a structured stage-gate process. Proprietary software is used to track team efforts, idea disposition and product and project progress, ensuring that resources and efforts remain focused on high-potential ideas. The stage-gate process and tracking software provide the structure that is a key element of this approach.

Another key to this process is its multi-disciplinary aspect. Innovation is too important to leave just to engineers and market researchers; our teams also include people from marketing, merchandising, sales and sales training, usability and ergonomics, industrial design and quality departments.

The final key is that it *IS* intense. Team members spend significant time together working *in the context of consumer input* through both observation and direct dialogue techniques. They have the final responsibility for specifying, collecting and interpreting consumer knowledge.

Conclusion

Being different isn't hard unless corporate conservatism, the innate instinct to criticize and "find fault," and reliance on traditional, so-called proven methods lead to conservative, "safe" ideas.

You **HAVE** to be unconventional. Risky? Sure, but no more so than the risk of your product descending to commodity status.

Creative and unconventional doesn't mean outlandish or crazy.

While the methods described in this paper are unconventional and different, they have all been proven effective by the forward-thinking organizations that use them. Most important, each is firmly rooted in directly observing and sharing the customers' real-world experiences. Tapping into that is the key to successful differentiation.

About the Authors: This article was prepared by the staff of Marketing Partners, Inc. We are a business improvement organization formed in 1983. Marketing Partners and its predecessor organizations have served associations, communities, consumer packaged goods, consumer durables and health care clients across the United States since 1971. Our senior professionals have academic qualifications and business experience in advertising, business management, communications, engineering, administration and finance, human resources and organizational development, information technology, journalism, law, marketing, market research, quality, product development, public relations, and related fields.

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