

Getting on the Same Page: Understanding Our Customers Just in Time

“We’re sure we’ve got a hit,” said my client. “The problem is that the market is not responding as we expected.” I listened to their version of events: an innovative technology was introduced that allows frozen blood to be thawed, stored, and available for transfusion much longer than any device in the market. My client’s military customers said this was important. The engineers worked hard to build a better mouse trap which was then introduced to the market. To my client’s surprise, hospitals were not buying the new device. My client had “hit a wall.” Hence, their call to me.

When we hit a wall with our customers, the thing to do is to talk to them and find out why. I can do this more easily than my client because I am not invested in any particular answer. I just want to understand the customer’s reality. So, I engaged hospital customers in a conversation. What were their issues in terms of thawing frozen blood for transfusions? How much waste was involved? These conversations were very revealing. I found out that a longer shelf life for “thawed” blood was not important because hospitals were conservative in their depletion of frozen blood inventory. However, they were experiencing a shortage of trained technicians and the current equipment was hard to use. My client’s new device had a “push and go” feature so that a technician need not “baby-sit” the equipment while it did its job. Now this was an innovation that hospitals cared about.

I met with my client to share the news. “The military and the traditional hospital market have very different needs,” I said. I revealed how hospitals care about the user-friendly and efficient aspects of the system and that the military’s needs reflected larger geographies and acute transfusion needs during combat. Perhaps because we live in such a technology-driven world, it is hard to believe that something as soft as “easy to use” could win the day. The team was surprised but went with the findings. A repositioning effort was executed stressing extended shelf life to the military, and ease of use to hospitals. And then the hit they thought they smelled came. It was another example marketers frequently experience of the power of understanding the customer.

There are many reasons we have difficulty *getting on the same page* with our customers. It can be as simple as:

- **We don't engage in a conversation with our market:** This was the case of my client who did not ask the hospital segment what it valued and assumed it was the same as the military. Customers are like ice cream – they come in many flavors.

- **We don't ask the right questions:** A colleague of mine launched a business based on the answer to a question, “Would you like a website to help profile your personal health risks, so that you can more actively manage them?” The answer was an unequivocal yes. The question that was not asked, was “How much will you pay?” That became the struggle and the demise of the company.

- **Customers are confused and don't know what they want:** Especially with new inventions, customers can't always tell you what they want, making it virtually impossible to be on their page. Whole languages may have to be created to engage in conversation. I was in New York when Citicorp introduced “ATMs” (automated teller machines) which the market was very cool to in the beginning. John Reed, who championed the technology and later became Citicorp's CEO, bet his career that ATMs would eventually rule to the benefit of customers and Citicorp alike. Indeed, customers became less confused, and ATMs became the banking standard with their inherent efficiency and 24/7 access.

- **Our customers know what they want but we don't like the answer:** We have all ignored feedback when the news was not to our liking, at work or at home. At home the topics can range from the mundane (what music should we listen to in the car?) to the more substantial (what should our family vacation be?). My take-away? Don't ask the question if you are either afraid of or won't act on the answer.

Speaking of customers, I've heard loud and clear from my "On the Same Page" readers, that you want some helpful hints, if not answers, as to how we get on the same page. The feedback given was that the topic definitely resonates, and the humor was appreciated, but answers are better than mere musings. While I can't always provide answers, fortunately we are on the topic of customers (a topic that by training I am comfortable with), so here are my "same page" tips for the day:

The conversations need to be ongoing and incremental in revealing "their world." Whole pictures are seldom given at once, and if they are, be suspicious. This applies to our children too. My daughter suggested that I write an article on parents' expectations regarding their children. Why? Because my daughter and I have had numerous conversations about 1) grades and what they mean 2) how high to shoot in goal setting and 3) achieving balance. While no definitive answers have emerged, we usually understand each other (far better than had I said, "Daughter, we are going to sit down now and discuss school performance, college goals, and where you can find some occasional down time...Now let's get started.") In business too, customers often need to mull through new ideas, or rework old ideas before they can give us the insights we need.

In testing for a response, take ideas out of the stratosphere and make them real, and easy to answer. Which question is better? "If I gave you this widget, how would you use it, and would it improve your operation?" or, "How will this widget improve your company's overall performance?" The second question not only has built-in bias but will not elicit very specific information compared to question one.

Finally, be patient. Answers don't always come right away, and we need to build some slack into the fact-gathering process. To borrow an analogy from the game of tennis, a well-hit ball is more about timing than brute force. Muscling through an answer is not usually a good thing. Real conversations with no built in biases, questions that wet our curiosity, and above all superior listening skills will get us to our customers' page.