

Virtual Brainstorming

When new ideas are needed, a brainstorming meeting is often the automatic response. A group is assembled, a moderator/facilitator is chosen or hired, and creativity happens. Or not. Sometimes there isn't time to accommodate everyone's schedule, and travel time and costs constrain who can participate. Sometimes the stars are not lined up right, or the energy level is not high enough. And sometimes the participants are not really motivated or given the right incentives to work really hard on coming up with good ideas.

A new component of MIT Sloan School's Virtual Customer initiative¹ is addressing many of these issues by using the Internet to allow brainstorming to take place without the constraints of having everyone in the same place at the same time. Olivier Toubia, while a Sloan doctoral student, devised a scheme to permit a brainstorming session to take place over a series of days (or even weeks). But even more important, Olivier developed an incentive and scoring system that encourages respondents to really work at being creative.

On-line focus groups, chat rooms, bulletin boards and USENET groups have all been used by groups or teams at one time or another for asynchronous interaction, but it's the incentive and scoring system that makes Olivier's application unique. Even with old-fashioned brainstorming, some participants don't work very hard. This "free riding" is a well-known issue and can occur because the output of the session is usually aggregated and participants typically are not rewarded individually for their efforts. In addition, the non-judgmental "norms" of a brainstorming session ("There are no bad ideas...") can discourage the critical thinking needed to develop initial ideas into real winners.

Olivier's system turns brainstorming into a game where the winner is the one whose ideas inspire the group and provide a foundation for subsequent creativity.

When the system is used inside an organization, ideas can be submitted anonymously so that they are evaluated strictly on their own merits. The software organizes the ideas into chains and provides an easy-to-use interface that prompts participants to begin their contributions with phrases like "more precisely," "on the other hand," "instead," etc. The result reads like a conversation. Just as the worth of an academic paper is judged by the number of times it is referenced by other papers, so too are contributions valued by the number of subsequent ideas in the chain. After a few days there will be many contributions, and the "chains" will have gone off in surprising directions. Depending on who the participants are, the points they earn could be redeemed for cash, frequent flyer miles, access to preferred parking places, etc. If the participants were ordinary consumers being paid for their participation (as they are with a regular focus group,) the points could be converted into an additional reward or incentive.

Here at AMS, we have used Olivier's Ideation system to address some of our own strategic planning questions. Not only have we found the generated ideas to be valuable, but we have been able to fine tune the method to improve the users' experiences.

The system is still being developed, but it should soon be ready for external testing. We think it is becoming an effective (and fun!) way to achieve maximum creative thinking at a minimal cost.

— Bob Klein

¹For more information about AMS' Virtual Customer tools, please refer to "AMS Voices" issue No. 10.

Is QFD Making a Comeback?

In the past year or so, there has been a resurgence of interest in *Quality Function Deployment* (QFD), the Japanese product development methodology that helps companies translate customer needs into product and service design features. Not only has this become apparent in our own consulting practice, but also in the growing number of conference presentations and articles about QFD.

Just a few short years ago, the buzz was that QFD was headed for the waste dump of failed new product development methodologies. Why did it fall into disfavor? First, QFD was cursed with that horrible name! “Quality Function Deployment” is a direct Japanese translation. While the words are supposedly filled with rich, multi-layered connotation in Japanese, unfortunately, the name has absolutely no intuitive meaning in English!

Second, the name itself includes the dreaded “Q” word. While QFD emerged from a rather distant corner of the Quality movement of the late 1980s, it often got painted with the same brush. So, when the movement began to decline in the mid-1990s, QFD seemed to get taken down along with it. The great irony, of course, is that even though no one wants to talk about quality much anymore, the movement’s principles remain deeply imbedded in our daily thinking and practice.

Third, there was the issue of QFD’s often overwhelming tedium. Many companies who tried it reported that their product development teams were nearly brought to their knees, locked in conference rooms for days, weeks, and sometimes months on end dealing with the multitude of matrices and all of the detail. For many, it just didn’t seem practical or worth the pain.

So, what’s changed? Well, for starters, there are now several new management movements that deal with many of the same issues as the Quality movement, and that still benefit from the use of QFD. For instance, *Customer Relationship Management* (CRM) deals with the same set of problems as the Customer Satisfaction movement that formed the pillar of Quality programs used to this day. And the *Six Sigma* movement that is currently in vogue has always espoused the use of QFD. It just uses a slightly different vocabulary.

Second, there is now a growing generation of QFD trainers and facilitators who have developed significant new processes and tools to reduce the tedium. They have traded in the original academic purist approach to QFD, with its multiple houses and enormous data requirements, for a more practical approach, which teams are now more willing to undertake. And they are getting really good results without sacrificing too much of the rigor.

Finally, the primary reason for QFD’s resurgence is that the underlying need still exists. Product development teams are still faced with the problem of translating customer needs into product design specifications, process design metrics, and superior product features. One doesn’t have to use QFD to do this, but it remains quite simply the best way to do it – the most thorough, objective, and dispassionate way to sift through all of the conflicting data and emotional points of view, and come up with better ways to respond to customer needs.

Whatever else is going on, as long as this need remains a key hurdle in new product development, there will always be a good place for QFD – despite the horrible name.

— *Gerry Katz*

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