

Is Brainstorming *Really* Dead?

According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* (June 14, 2006) article by Jared Sandberg, traditional brainstorming exercises are doomed to failure. Sandberg quotes such experts in the field as John Clark, a former university dean, who asserts, “I can’t remember a single instance where a group produced a really creative idea.” Rather, in his experience, “most often someone hijacks the topic at hand, tries to prove everyone else wrong, works to impress the superiors who are present, or just plain blathers for his own enjoyment.”

Surprisingly, reports Sandberg, brainstorming may be one instance in which teamwork does not produce great results. According to research conducted by Professor Paul Paulus of the University of Texas, group brainstormers were typically found to perform at about half the level they would if they had been brainstorming alone. Warns Harvard Professor David Perkins, “sometimes group sessions can result in one person’s bad idea tainting and limiting the range of others’ ideas.” To avoid this, Perkins suggests that people write their ideas down privately and then bring them into the group setting.

These types of impediments to creativity are precisely what drove Applied Marketing Science to develop its IDEALYST® web-based brainstorming tool in conjunction with researchers at the MIT Sloan School and Columbia University. Not only are the problems described by Sandberg – group “bullies” and “hijackers,” for instance – of concern, but logistical factors, such as the cost and inconvenience of gathering participants in a single location at the same time, also are unnecessarily burdensome.

Professor Olivier Toubia of Columbia Business School was instrumental in developing the methodology underlying IDEALYST, which flies in the face of many of the principles of conventional brainstorming. Toubia’s research has received a lot of attention among academics at various conferences, because it

recommends an entirely new and highly creative solution. Toubia’s research supports these key points:

- It is impossible to keep egos and politics out of a brainstorming session because people are always subject to rivalries, and pleasing the boss or trying to “look good” are driving factors.
- It is unrealistic to try to shoehorn creativity into a fixed time period; most people benefit from having time to think for a while before responding to ideas or suggesting new ones.
- Traditional brainstorming requires participants to be co-located, which can be prohibitively expensive and time-consuming.
- Rewards are typically allocated in a sub-optimal manner, either by compensating an entire team for one person’s ideas, or by rewarding only those who submitted the winning ideas.

Toubia’s solution to these shortcomings is multi-faceted, but the key components involve moving the process to the web, and instituting a clever and unique incentives-based reward system. Through this approach, IDEALYST offers key advantages over traditional brainstorming:

- Participants remain anonymous by using graphical icons as personal identifiers, eliminating the impact of politics on people’s free and open communication.
- Participants from various locations and time zones can log onto the IDEALYST session and contribute input whenever it is most convenient for them, eliminating the requirement for co-location.
- IDEALYST is played over the course of one to two weeks, allowing participants time to mull over previous postings and carefully consider their responses.
- Participants earn points, redeemable for cash, for every idea posted, as well as whenever others build on their ideas, encouraging greater collaboration.

So whether you agree or disagree with the recent press that brainstorming may be dead, perhaps it’s time to start thinking outside the box, and try this new, state-of-the-art way to brainstorm.

— Gerry Katz

The (Un)changing Face of VOC: A Retrospective

When I first joined AMS in 1989, the celebrated article “The House of Quality” had been recently published in the *Harvard Business Review* and Abbie Griffin’s seminal paper, “The Voice of the Customer” was still four years away. Nine years later, I left AMS for the non-profit world and rejoined the company late last year. To my surprise, I have found that although there have been substantial changes in the world of new product development, the foundational precepts of Voice of the Customer remain unchanged.

Throughout the early- and even mid-1990s, talking to prospective clients about the Voice of the Customer (VOC) was sometimes an uphill battle. Although the quality movement had been gathering steam – with its own buzzwords, acronyms and even some prestigious awards! – there were still many who needed convincing that listening to customers was good business practice. These days, it seems that using the Voice of the Customer has become standard procedure, and there are multiple methodologies for doing so. In fact, “best practices” research conducted by the Product Development and Management Association (PDMA)¹ confirm that companies gathering and using VOC information as part of their new product development process are more successful than those that don’t. What was cutting edge then is common practice now.

Over the past 10-15 years, the use of VOCALYST® and similar techniques has sky-rocketed. Highly sophisticated products, multiple customer segments, extremely challenging customer recruits, and increasing interest in international research, are all part of the regular mix. The Internet has made it more cost-effective to gather quantitative data on importance and product performance, thereby creating new opportunities for follow-on quantitative research. Processes like Design for Six Sigma

have become deeply embedded in companies, bringing their own terminology and techniques, and there is an increasing focus on training and coaching, enabling internal groups to gather their own VOC information. And although AMS has always conducted VOC research for a broad range of industries, the mix of industries has changed over time, from a focus on service development, financial services, and public utilities ten years ago, to a focus on medical devices, telecommunications, and other types of high-tech products today.

For the most part, however, these changes are superficial; the theory that underlies the Voice of the Customer remains exactly the same. VOC best practices have evolved somewhat, but they remain fundamentally unchanged: using the customer’s own words and language, having customers themselves organize and prioritize VOC data, and focusing on actual needs – *not solutions*.

I was recently reviewing a customer needs hierarchy on “what makes a good movie theater” that was produced by AMS in the early 1990s. Surprisingly, it read as if it were gathered yesterday. For example, customer needs relating to “easy to get my tickets” and “able to get information on when or where movies are playing” are just as valid now as they were 15 years ago, even though comprehensive movie information sources like www.fandango.com were barely on the radar screen back then.

The bottom line is, that although the terminology and acronyms may change over time, and the tools may get more sophisticated, the importance of Voice of the Customer remains the same: helping clients develop better products that truly satisfy customer needs.

— Derby Swanson

¹The Comparative Performance Assessment Study (CPAS), PDMA Foundation, 2004.

© Copyright 2006 Applied Marketing Science, Inc.



AMS Voices is a forum for new ideas in management. It is published by Applied Marketing Science, Inc., leaders in using Voice of the Customer technology to develop superior products and services. We'd like to hear from you. If you have an issue you would like addressed, or have other comments, please contact us:

Applied Marketing Science, Inc.
303 Wyman Street, Waltham, MA 02451
web: www.ams-inc.com

tel: 781-250-6300
email: newsletter@ams-inc.com
fax: 781-684-0075