

IDEALYST – Building on Our Clients’ Ideas

Since its launch in 2004, hundreds of marketing and product managers have used IDEALYST® – AMS’s innovative online brainstorming system – to generate ideas for redefining and improving their products and services. IDEALYST is gaining considerable momentum, spreading virally throughout many of our clients’ organizations and becoming an integral part of their innovation process. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive; clients report increased user involvement and enthusiasm for the brainstorming process, and, more importantly, greater creative output in each IDEALYST game. This success has had a valuable side-benefit: our clients’ enthusiasm has led them to suggest a continual stream of enhancements to IDEALYST that have resulted in richer output and an improved user experience. Clients appreciate that we are listening to the Voice of the Customer and that we do so in real-time, often providing requested enhancements within a few days. Ideas for improvements are also generated by our own product team, in our continual quest to improve both the quality of the user experience and efficiency of the process. Here are examples of some recent enhancements:

- **Improved idea tracking.** As IDEALYST has spread within our client companies, many of whom now play concurrent games on a variety of topics, the quantity of ideas generated per game has increased dramatically. To facilitate the process of reviewing and evaluating the ideas submitted, IDEALYST allows participants to check off ideas as they are read, and automatically highlights the newest idea. At their next login, participants can quickly spot new ideas and more easily stay current with the game.
- **New content types.** A new feature enables participants to include hyperlinks and attachments as part of their entries, which improves creativity and provides a richer means of expression. Players can now direct other participants to photos, articles, documents, drawings and formulas, and are no longer constrained to what can be expressed through words.

- **Enhanced moderator functions.** Moderators can now configure more options at the start of a game. They can enable or disable the challenge feature, which lets participants dispute others’ entries and helps moderators closely monitor the quality of the game. They can also choose whether to allow users to submit ideas on new topics, or to restrict them to questions originally chosen for the game. These new features let moderators better define the scope of the game, ensuring that the ideas submitted stay relevant to the client’s objectives.
- **More continuous participation.** The most successful IDEALYST sessions keep participants interested and engaged throughout the two-week game period. To encourage frequent visits to the game, a downloadable desktop widget actively notifies participants whenever their ideas have been built upon. A simple click on the widget directs participants to the newest “builds” so they can respond quickly.
- **Creativity exercises.** Working with ideation guru Jim Ferry of the Boston Innovation Group, we are developing “creativity calisthenics” within IDEALYST to stimulate innovative thinking during a session. These simple, yet proven, mental exercises will help participants think “out-of-the-box” and arrive at ideas that are truly breakthroughs.
- **Improved idea sorting and classification.** To help moderators sort through ideas both during and after each game, IDEALYST will soon be integrated with other AMS tools that facilitate the categorization of ideas into groups. Moderators will be able to sort through ideas efficiently to identify those that are most innovative and actionable.

AMS will continue to listen to the Voice of the Customer and respond to client suggestions about IDEALYST. To stay current with future enhancements, please visit www.ams-inc.com/products/idealist.htm or send inquiries to idealist@ams-inc.com.

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Who is Your Customer?

Business is littered with platitudes about the primacy of the customer. *The customer is King. If we don't take care of our customers, someone else will. The customer always comes first.* It may come as a surprise that despite these catchy clichés, many business-to-business (B2B) companies persist in maintaining a narrow and arbitrary definition about who “the customer” really is. As a result, they deliberately target their product development strategy toward meeting the needs of just one point in the network of vertical and horizontal relationships that collectively represent “the customer.” At best, a company will miss scores of opportunities to extract value from the market by meeting the needs of customers it traditionally did not consider. At worst, a company will cede ground to competitors who manage to figure it out first.

Voice of the Customer (VOC) – the process of understanding the needs that drive customers to adopt new products and services – cannot begin until you have a good understanding of who your customers are and how your market is structured. Depending on your industry, your customers may comprise several layers, beginning with your immediate buyers and cascading (eventually) to consumers and end-users. Alternatively, your market may only have one or two layers, but with a bevy of buyers and influencers at each level.

At the start of a VOC project, ask yourself a simple question: “Who needs to be satisfied for our product to be successful?” Often, the best answer starts with application of the classic “value chain” framework. Beginning with the end consumer, trace the paths back to your own company’s loading dock, identifying all of the intermediate steps along the way – installers, retailers, wholesalers, distributors, OEMs, component manufacturers, and so on. The resulting map could have three to five layers and more than one path.

With the map of the value chain (or value “web”) in hand, examine each link to identify all of the actors that together play the part of the customer. Remember that a B2B customer is often an amalgam of distinct and often disparate voices, each of whom provides input into the purchasing decision – some are “users” while others are “choosers.” If you make medical devices, your customer may comprise physicians, nurses, executive administrators, lab technicians, and purchasing managers. In a manufacturing firm, your customer may comprise marketers, design engineers, assembly-line workers, materials handlers, and maintenance technicians, as well as procurement officers who will ultimately make the purchase.

Once you have identified your downstream customers and the roles within them, you are ready to plan the details of your VOC project. Your options depend on your business goals, your product strategy (e.g., new to market, improvement of an existing product, cost reduction, etc.), and your budget. If your goal is to improve efficiency and customer service through the value chain, you might decide to execute a comprehensive VOC to examine the wants and needs of all of your customers. Alternatively, if your goal is to redesign the functionality of a product, you might decide to “drill down” into one point on the value chain, or even just one role within the value chain. Either way, with an accurate assessment of who your customer is, you will be much better prepared to figure out what your customer wants.

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