

GETTING EMOTIONAL:

Using VOCALYST^â to Link Functional Product Performance to Customers' Emotional Needs

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ABSTRACT

In October 2003 our client, a major consumer products company, launched an effort to revitalize a weakening brand in the female health and beauty category. At the center of this process was VOCALYST, a process used to identify the Voice of the Customer for products and services.

In this particular case, our client wanted to better understand customers' needs in relation to one of its female health and beauty products. Specifically, the company hoped to uncover both performance needs (i.e. functional needs) and "emotional" needs related to its product. The key was not only to elicit customers' functional and emotional needs, but also to understand how the two types of needs were linked in customers' minds.

A variation on AMS's VOCALYST methodology was used to draw out and refine this information. The three-month study produced a host of rich data, including detailed needs, hierarchies, linkages, and individual brand "emotional profiles." Our client finished the project with a clear roadmap for the specific product, positioning, and advertising changes necessary to revitalize its product. AMS's modified VOCALYST provided critical new insights and a solid foundation for future product development.

As we are unable to cite actual project data for confidentiality reasons, we have replicated the project internally using body wash as a substitute female health and beauty product. While the case study that follows is based on that "fictional" internal project, it is an accurate representation of the project objectives, approach, and insights associated with the original client study. A chart representing our findings appears at the end of this study.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In early fall 2003 our client was faced with the challenge of revitalizing a stagnant brand and differentiating its product within the increasingly crowded body wash market. Store shelves displayed a dizzying array of products, each of which was offered in multiple scents, varieties, and packages.

Our client's brand had a longstanding presence in the body wash category, but had experienced a gradual drop in market share. The brand was positioned towards women and had recently been redesigned with more feminine scents, updated packaging, and new advertising campaigns. Despite these efforts, however, the brand remained stagnant. Female consumers just didn't seem interested. What was the problem?

Executives suspected the issue might lay not with the "functional" aspects of the product – e.g. its performance, scent, and packaging – but rather with its "emotional" component. Put another way, no matter how well formulated or packaged a product might be, if it wasn't positioned to push the right emotional "buttons," then customers were likely to pass it by on their trip down the store aisle.

To help discover the root of the problem, our client launched a modified VOCALYST study in late 2003. The VOCALYST method was specifically selected because it would provide a clear, detailed catalog of customers' wants and needs regarding our client's product. Additionally, since VOCALYST was designed to express those wants and needs in the customers' own words, it would provide a common language for our client's R&D, advertising, and product departments to use in their discussions. And perhaps most important, the VOCALYST process would help demystify the important but often hidden linkages between customers' emotional and functional product needs.

WHY EMOTIONAL NEEDS?

Market research has long illustrated that customers buy the products and services that best meet their needs. For example, a deodorant needs to "stop sweat" and "eliminate odor," just as a shampoo needs to "make lots of lather" and "leave hair shiny." These are "functional" needs that, in many ways, define both the product category itself and the "must-have features" of any successful product offering within that category.

For many products, however, marketplace success requires more than just delivering on functional needs. In order to be successful, products often need to meet customers' "emotional" needs, as well.

Emotional needs describe how a particular product makes a customer feel, and are often the basis for product positioning and advertising. For example, “makes me feel comfortable around other people” and “helps me feel confident” are two basic emotional needs that a beauty aide may have to meet. For many consumer products, customers’ emotional needs – *and how the product is positioned to deliver on those needs* – can be just as important as what the product actually does functionally. Equally important, understanding the connections and linkages between customers’ emotional needs and the product’s functional characteristics can help marketers create a compelling product and subsequent advertising strategy.

While personal care products, like soap, shampoo, and cosmetics, are a natural fit for emotional messages, food, cleaning agents, health and wellness aids, and a host of other products and services can also benefit from identifying and meeting customers’ emotional needs. Rare is the product to which customers do not have some emotional, albeit usually hidden, connection.

PROJECT PROCESS: VOCALYST WITH A TWIST

Before starting the VOCALYST study, the project team outlined the study’s goals, which included:

- Helping our client better understand customers’ functional and emotional needs surrounding the company’s product.
- Determining the relative strengths and weaknesses of our client’s brand in relation to these needs.
- Identifying the distinct linkages between emotional and functional needs (for example, which functional benefits were connected to which emotional needs).
- Creating an emotional “profile” for our client’s product versus competitive products.
- Recommending product, positioning, and advertising changes, as necessary.

With the goals clearly defined, work was ready to start. As with any VOCALYST study, the project began with collecting and identifying customer wants and needs. Interviews were conducted with female respondents in various geographic locations who had used, or were at least familiar with, our client’s product. In addition to probing for product likes, dislikes, and benefits, the interviews focused on identifying feelings associated with the product and its use. Actual product and advertising was used throughout the interviews as a conversation aide.

Prior to the start of interviews, respondents were asked to fill out a brief survey designed to “prime” them towards thinking about emotions, feelings, and related emotional vocabulary. Interview dialog included projective techniques to identify the complete set

of emotional needs associated with the product category. For example, respondents were asked to imagine certain work, social, or personal situations and to describe how they would feel in each.

Additionally, the interviews incorporated extensive probing to uncover the underlying emotions driving respondents' functional product needs. For example, probing beyond a simple "I want to be clean" statement illustrated that respondents had a need to feel comfortable around and accepted by others. Finally, respondents were asked to describe different brands' typical users, or to equate different brands to car models or animals. This information helped develop "personality" profiles for each brand.

Interviews were conducted in focus group facilities with two-way mirrors so that others would be able to watch the proceedings. Each interview was audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and then carefully read in order to identify specific wants and needs. Emerging needs were classified as "functional" or "emotional," and the original collection of needs was analyzed to eliminate duplicates and other statements that were not true underlying needs, but rather target values or solutions. The result was a list of 31 emotional and 53 functional needs "phrases" that formed the basis for the subsequent card sort process.

In the card sort process, each respondent was given two "decks" of cards. White cards were printed with functional needs statements, and pink cards were printed with emotional needs statements. Respondents first sorted the white cards with the functional needs into piles or bundles that "went together in their minds." Once this affinitization exercise was complete, respondents indicated the importance of each bundle and evaluated how well various product brands met the needs represented in each. Finally, they matched each pink card (containing an emotional need) to the pile of functional needs that, in their mind, had the strongest connection to that emotional need.

RESULTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Subsequent cluster analysis of the card sort data painted a clear picture of the linkages between customers' functional and emotional needs. Equally important, the analysis identified the respective strengths and weaknesses of existing products across a range of parameters. We successfully illustrated which features and emotional needs were important to customers, and mapped how well different product brands performed on each dimension of customer needs. Finally, customer perceptions of a brand's functional performance were matched with the emotional needs most closely related to that brand's particular functional strengths, to create individual emotional "profiles" for each brand.

In areas where our client's product performed relatively well on functional needs, recommendations focused on changing related emotional messaging, since functional product changes were unlikely to have a strong effect. Conversely, for functional needs areas with a large performance gap, recommendations focused on both product and emotional message changes.

Armed with this information, our client's product team was able to clearly identify areas where actual product changes were needed. In addition, the team was able to pinpoint areas where its product was emotionally "lacking," and where it could develop new advertising and positioning strategies that addressed the product's particular weaknesses. With the VOCALYST study results in hand, our client was in a strong position to revitalize the company's product.

KEY LESSONS

- Customers clearly link emotional needs to concrete product functions. Understanding these linkages can lead to better-positioned, stronger brands.
- A product can be a functional performance "superstar" but still lack the right emotional messaging. Both pieces are important for long-term product success.
- Finally, understanding how customers see your product or brand's emotional "profile" is critical. In this particular case, emotional "mapping" of individual brands allowed our client to gain a clear understanding of how customers perceived the product space. Sometimes, what companies *think* customers perceive is different from what customers *actually* perceive in the marketplace.
