



Gerry Katz

Viewpoint

“We already knew that”: The ultimate put-down in VoC

Gerry Katz, Executive Vice President, Applied Marketing Science, Inc.
(gkatz@ams-inc.com)

Many product development managers run into the following problem: After extensive research is done on a new product development challenge or opportunity, the researchers come up with information the product manager feels he or she already knew. Does this response lessen the value of the research? Should the manager have saved money by just guessing that his or her gut instincts were right? Our contributing senior editor Gerry Katz takes on these questions.

You’ve just been put in charge of a major new product development (NPD) initiative. You study up on all of the latest accepted best practices and processes. You form your cross-functional team. You put together your project road map. You do a technology assessment. And now it’s time to do your Voice of the Customer (VoC) study to better understand customer wants and needs.

You, your team, and your consultant spend two or three months in the field doing ethnography, customer visits, and one-on-one interviews. You extract the needs, organize them into a hierarchy, and do a rigorous prioritization survey. And now it’s time to present the results to management. You put together an attractive, well-organized PowerPoint presentation, practice exactly what you’re going to say, and get the team ready to stand together in support of the conclusions.

The presentation seems to be going really well for about 45 minutes—and then comes the most dreaded comment in all of new

product development, the one that feels like a punch in the stomach: “We already knew that.” Ouch!

This scenario is all too common in VoC research and, for that matter, almost any type of market research. But

take heart—there are a few good comebacks whenever this happens, comebacks that will get you up off the floor and ready to continue your mission. They may not always convince the person who uttered the dreaded line, but they are the absolute truth.

Comeback 1: “No, you didn’t!”

A good VoC always looks incredibly logical after the fact. That alone often leads to the dreaded put-down. But in many cases, it’s just not true. A short personal story should help illustrate this point.

Very early in my career (during the early 1970s), when I was completely green, I was working with two of my mentors on a

perceptual mapping study of the analgesic market. Our client was a wonderfully colorful guy—smart and opinionated, but always willing to listen and learn. Before the project got underway, he speculated over lunch about how the maps were going to turn out, scribbling diagrams on a paper napkin. I’m not sure why I did this, but when we got up to leave, I took the napkin and threw it into my folder—and then completely forgot about it.

The project proceeded smoothly, and a few months later, it was time to go back and present the results. When we finally revealed the maps, our client exclaimed, “You see, it turned out exactly like I said!” Just then, I remembered that discussion over lunch, and wondered whether I still had that scribbled napkin that I had taken. I looked in my folder, and sure enough, there it was. I tossed it on the table. We all leaned over to look at it, and guess what? The scribbled diagrams looked *nothing* like the final result!

Ever since then, I often make it a practice to conduct what I like to call a “humbling” exercise. Before we do any customer research, we ask our client to speculate about what they’re going to hear, answering questions the way they *think* that customers will. Then, when we present the actual results side-by-side, in almost every case, there are enormous differences. This is particularly true of the prioritization, where things that you thought were absolutely critical are only moderately so for the customers, and vice versa. My conclusion in these cases: “No, you *didn’t* already know that!”

Comeback 2: “So what?”

Of course, you already knew a lot of the needs. Shame on you if you didn’t! Most companies know their markets pretty well—as they should. Many people go into a VoC study expecting to hear dozens of needs that they’ve never heard before, especially the ones that are referred to as latent, unspoken, or unarticulated needs—the ones that the customers didn’t even know they had. But the truth is that there will usually only be a handful of these, and some of them will just be a slightly different spin on another well-known need.

This expectation misses the point of VoC. Sure, we love to hear new needs, but that’s not the primary goal. The goal is to get *all* of the needs out on the table—at a common level, i.e., not mixing the high-level needs, such as “ease of use,” with the more detailed

“But take heart—there are a few good comebacks whenever this happens...that will get you up off the floor.”

“Of course, you already knew a lot of the needs. Shame on you if you didn’t!”

needs, such as “easy for new users to learn” and “easy to maintain without special tools,” as well as in a common format, i.e., not mixing tenses, persons, and positives and negatives.

This goal is absolutely critical for organizing the needs into a prioritized hierarchy, which helps you decide which needs to devote your limited resources to. When your engineers, research and development scientists, and process managers are charged with finding new solutions and innovative features, they need to have this type of detail in front of them, regardless of whether the needs are completely new to them or long-standing and well known.

Comeback 3: “What’s the point?”

Too many people misunderstand the reason for doing a VoC study. They go into it expecting to hear “the answer”—that blinding flash of insight handed to them on a silver platter. In their view, all they need to do now is build it and they (the customers) will come. This scenario is not completely unheard of, but it’s pretty rare. Many customers aren’t very creative and it’s a mistake to ask them to do what is really your job. All they are supposed to

do is articulate what they’re trying to get done and what makes it hard or easy for them to do so. These are the wants and needs of the customers. Coming up with the solutions to those needs is what your product developers are supposed to do. The fact that most of those needs are already known is inconsequential. The most important unmet needs should still get most of your focus—whether they are known or unknown. Many breakthroughs and disruptive technologies actually address completely obvious needs in the marketplace; they just move performance ahead or increase the importance of a previously less important need.

The other goal of a VoC study is to gain insights about how it all works: the customers and their needs and the environment in which your product or service is used. What often happens is that you come up with a new “spin,” or a subtle variation on a need that has been known forever. The point is that creativity and invention are usually far more productive and focused with this type of data in hand than if you just told your product developers to make something new.

So, the next time someone lays the dreaded “we already knew that” comment on you, take heart and defend yourself. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you didn’t ask the right questions, didn’t interview the right customers, or weren’t listening carefully enough. In most cases, such an outcome is to be completely expected and is probably the exact data you need as a springboard for creativity and innovation. **V**

Applied Marketing Science (AMS) is an innovative Voice of the Customer market research and consulting firm. We help companies truly understand the needs of their customers and translate those needs into superior new product and service designs, and improved business processes and strategies. Founded in 1989 based on pioneering research conducted at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, AMS has become an internationally recognized leader in Voice of the Customer market research and related product development methodologies.



Applied Marketing Science
303 Wyman Street
Waltham, MA 02451
781-250-6300
www.ams-inc.com

Reprinted with permission of PDMA Visions Magazine, March, 2009