



Customer-Centric Innovation: Market Success Grows Out of Discovering Customer Needs

We live in a world grown skeptical of ‘new and improved’ products and services. Too often, the change is a marketing gimmick – the same old product in a new color, size or package. Sometimes a flashy new gadget or feature is sold as innovation. Invariably, these products fail to improve a company’s market share because they simply don’t offer customers anything they need.

Finding real market opportunities begins with discovering what your clients really need and understanding their challenges and problems. A customer-centric focus will ensure your innovation process identifies and prioritizes market prospects based on what you know and understand of your customers’ needs.

Customer service reps, salespeople, product developers and many others within your company likely already know an incredible amount about what your customers need and want, and why they turn to you for solutions. What most organizations need is a collaborative process that quickly taps that wealth of customer data to gather keen insights into potential new product and service concepts.

- 08.12.10** A large manufacturing company contracted Basadur Applied Creativity (BAC) to lead staff in the launch of a new service and product development process. The company wanted to avoid leaping into developing new products that wouldn’t satisfy the needs of existing customers and meet the demands of emerging global markets. Instead, it wanted to ensure its process began by developing a deep understanding of the desires and challenges of its customers.

Methodology

A brief pre-consultation was held with all key stakeholders to clearly determine the business objectives and ideal outcomes of planned market opportunity ideation sessions.

Representatives from various regions and departments were brought together for a dynamic and interactive two-day session. Prior to arriving, participants completed an online exercise that established their personal problem solving profile. A brief analysis of the profiles provided the group with an overview of the Simplicity Thinking problem solving system, an understanding of their own unique style and an overview of the range of styles of the participants in the session.

Before the session, each participant was given a great deal of market research to review. Everyone was directed to pick out the two intriguing pieces of information that struck them as either being most important, or something that surprised them. Upon arrival, these key facts were posted on the walls for everyone to see.

The session focused on identifying and prioritizing customer challenges. Customer challenges were identified as statements beginning with the question, “How might the customer...?” Additional questions of “Why?” and “What’s stopping...?” were used to create a large map of challenges. A facilitated discussion helped the group prioritize the most important customer challenges.

Possible solutions to each of those challenges were created, resulting in a number of new product and service concepts. The ideas and concepts arising from the session were documented and compiled into a digital format to create a permanent record and provide a starting point for the next part of the product development process.

Results and Impacts

The exercise allowed the company to significantly consolidate its customer knowledge, identify key facts and challenges, and use a unique, innovative problem solving approach to map a future direction. Not only did the group understand and agree on the most pressing challenges facing their customers, they became aligned around them and generated a plethora of ideas. The two-day session resulted in a well-documented and prioritized list of new market opportunities and product concepts based on real needs of real customers.

Summary

A customer-centric approach to innovation ensures that new products and services actually discover and meet the needs of customers and build corporate market share in a world that has become cynical about the real value of 'new and improved' products and services.