Best Practices for Obtaining Consumer Insights Faster

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Put the customer at the center of everything you do.

"Put the customer at the center of everything you do" is a best practice that cuts across product development, marketing, and customer experience functions. How can companies ensure that they have the voice of the customer at the right time, with relevant insights to inform business decisions?

Stakeholders need both the hard figures to base investment decisions on and the softer "whys" that help explain customers' decision-making behavior. How can brands have the intelligence they need to minimize risk and maximize investments?

Long-standing qualitative and quantitative consumer research techniques can be applied, which help get consumer insights closer to the decision-making table. Historically, obtaining consumer input for improvement initiatives or new business endeavors takes weeks to implement successfully. However, the speed of business today often can't accommodate this amount of time to include consumer input, leading to either sub-standard research and less useful consumer input, or skipping the step of obtaining consumer input completely. Both result in sub-optimal products and consumer experiences, perpetuating the business challenges you face.

What can brands do to ensure they can act fast and include critical consumer feedback along the way? Whether you are looking to screen new product ideas, inform product development decisions, or enhance a brand experience, there are four ways any brand can quickly obtain consumer input for your important business decisions.

1. **Make a quilt.**
   Stitch together quant and qual
2. **Stay flexible** to be relevant
3. **Use all the data** you have
4. **Get your hands dirty,** but not too dirty

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1. Make a quilt

Quantitative (survey-based) and qualitative (most commonly focus groups) research serve different, though important business intelligence roles, and you should not sacrifice one over the other. Quantitative research is critical to obtaining the rigorous business intelligence you need to make an investment decision. For example, a new product should not pass new product development stage-gates without having KPIs, such as purchase intent, measured via methodologically sound sampling and survey construction.

Qualitative research should also be leveraged to provide the details your product and service teams need to make improvements. The rich, emotional feedback consumers provide in qualitative research is pivotal to making relevant, impactful product and service improvements – the changes that actually move the needle.

You need the quant for go/no-go decisions and the qual for the depth to make the necessary improvements to your product and service. Though, most brands do not have weeks to obtain all of the insights from consumers needed to successfully drive change or launch a new product. Creating a seamless workflow from a quant survey to an online research community platform for qualitative exploration can provide both the firm data you need to make the decisions of the day, as well as the depth and detail you need to inform how to improve your service or innovate your product.

The technology exists today to be able to have the best of both. Today, it is possible to administer a fully custom survey among a representative sample and recruit consumers for qualitative research directly from the survey. You can then begin the qualitative discussion with consumers in real-time. This greatly reduces the total time to obtain both quantitative and qualitative insights – from 10+ weeks on average to less than 2 weeks. This reduction in cycle time makes it possible to include relevant, timely consumer research into your existing workflows.

Companies that effectively do this will benefit from products and services that are more relevant for consumers, with customers who stay with brands longer, become advocates, and bring others to the brand.

2. **Stay flexible** to be relevant

Whether you are conceptualizing and developing new products or working to enhance your brand experience, you need tools that help you quickly obtain consumer input. However, many tools in the market today designed to provide input quickly have constraints, which may limit the impact these tools can have on your business. For example, these tools limit the number of respondents, the types of questions, or survey length. These constraints get in the way of applying these consumer feedback tools in the way you need to use them to get the insights necessary to make a meaningful impact on consumers.

When tools are constrained and lack relevancy, they are either applied incorrectly or yet again, the consumer suffers when their input is not considered. However, these constraints don't need to be a point of concern anymore. Not all tools trade off flexibility for speed. Today, with a combination of skills, experience, and technology it is possible to deploy survey and qualitative research that maximize both flexibility and speed. Choose tools and partners who can customize solutions to meet specific needs, not partners who seem determined to fit your project needs into their product configuration. When leveraged by experts, survey platforms with integrated advanced analytics (such as discrete choice modeling, key driver modeling, optimal price analytics, and segmentation) can provide impactful insights in a matter of days.

Similarly, qualitative techniques historically require trade-offs between rigor and speed. Here too, technology and tools exist to minimize, or even eliminate, the need for these trade-offs. Leveraging market research online community (MROC) technology is one way to speed up qualitative research. Establishing a qualitative research learning agenda on the platform ahead of the recruitment and engaging with consumers from the moment they are recruited significantly reduces the time to insights. And these platforms facilitate intimate conversations across 100's of consumers (not the typical 8 participants in a focus group) providing depth and breadth, again without sacrificing time.

Skilled researchers can take advantage of an MROC platform's rich functionality, including subjective and projective techniques, incorporating pictures, video, and audio into both the research stimuli and consumer responses. This deep, emotional content is necessary to more completely understand the purchase decisions consumers make and ensure that more often than not, consumers choose your product over your competitors. With the right combinations of technology and expertise, you do have the time to ensure sound, robust consumer input is central to your decision making.

3. **Use all the data** you have

We all have an abundance of data, from sales figures to demographics on customers. However, creating timely, relevant datasets to take action is more difficult to come by. When innovating or improving products and services, brands that can seamlessly integrate data for use in marketing and/or customer service engagement will thrive. One straightforward way to ensure that you are optimizing your data is to integrate audience targeting data within your new product or experience enhancement initiatives.

Let's take a concept screen as an example. In a typical concept screen, a brand asks consumers to evaluate a set of concepts based on photos and descriptions, indicating how likely they would be to purchase the product if it were made available. Obtaining insights on which concept is most likely to be purchased is a critical input to the decision of which product to move forward in development. By integrating audience data into the concept evaluation data set, we can now identify an addressable audience to direct new product marketing, getting a jump start on prospecting, gaining consumer excitement for launch, and building up demand. And this audience can be defined by individuals who indicate they will likely purchase the product if it's brought to market. By determining who is likely to buy and scaling that to the addressable online and CTV ad market, a brand can quickly and effectively reach the right consumers to drive sales.

Layering in customer value with consumer feedback to a new product idea or a potential experience enhancement is a key to your success and another area where integrated datasets can help. New products and experiences need to appeal to high-value customers and simultaneously generate growth. To do all of this you need to understand who your high- value customers are, why they are high value, and then assess new concept or experience appeal among this key group compared to lower value groups. Without a clear understanding of how changes to products and services will impact your high-value customers, you increase the risk of an unsuccessful launch.

If customer value is not a core component of how you evaluate and progress your improvement pipeline, it should be. Technology and analytics, when applied correctly, can bring these disparate data sets together. By applying customer lifetime value models to your CRM, you can begin to evaluate improvement initiatives in light of customer value segments. Furthermore, look- a-like modeling can be applied to prospect data sets to identify prospect audiences who are likely to become high-value customers.

4. **Get your hands dirty**, but not too dirty

The most impactful research occurs when key stakeholders are engaged first-hand, iterating on the learnings as they are developed. To effectively iterate, stakeholders need to pull up a seat to the table. This can be uncomfortable at times, as stakeholders tend to be more accustomed to being presented the results and recommendations at the culmination of a project, not as the research is being conducted. However, once stakeholders experience the benefit of being included earlier on, they are not likely to go back to waiting on a big reveal at the end of a project.

One of the benefits of the proliferation of market research technology is that it enhances our ability as researchers to iterate – to prioritize the key questions, get quick answers to those questions, and then asking the next set of questions, or perhaps a new set of questions based on what we learned. This building up of knowledge is much more impactful than the traditional research report. The quality and usefulness of the insights are enhanced greatly. Stakeholders learn as they go, making it easier for them to absorb the take-a-ways and, importantly, integrate consumer understanding into their regular decision making.

To facilitate this process, market research technology, such as dashboards and online qualitative platforms, provide robust reporting functionality. These platforms allow stakeholders access to research results as they come in. While this allows for meaningful insights to be developed quicker, it can also expose some of the messiness of research. If managed effectively, with research professionals setting expectations and guiding the way, cross-functional teams of researchers and stakeholders can more effectively understand and learn from consumers, implementing change more quickly to benefit the most important stakeholder – the customer.

One important characteristic of success in iterating to build knowledge is having experts in the right roles on the team. When corporate insights professionals are asked to spend time programming surveys on a do-it-yourself platform, their focus is taken away from consumer feedback and how it applies to business decisions to be made. This puts the success of the project, and more importantly the business decisions to be made, at risk. Put the task of crafting a methodologically sound survey into the hands of experts who know how to maximize the quality and usefulness of the data, minimizing error and risk along the way. A subject-matter expert can work quicker, more efficiently, and is less prone to mistakes, which all contribute to getting insights faster. Having experts in the right roles enhances the utility of the research, and cutting corners to save a few dollars in the short term will diminish the impact of your new product or service on your business.

Conclusion

Ensuring consumer input is considered in your brand's decision making requires planning and takes time. However, technology and methodologies have advanced to reduce the time it takes to obtain meaningful, useful insights from the consumers you covet. When implemented effectively, robust quantitative and rich qualitative feedback can be integrated with existing workflows to increase the chance that your next product innovation and customer experience improvement hits the mark. Successful brands leverage experts with specialized skills along with technology to reduce the time to insights, positively impacting their business in a systematic way for sustained success.

Take a look below...

to find out how some of Big Village's clients have been able to use these best practices to better inform their decision making

- **A CPG company** looking for growth
- **A tech company** needing better targeting for a new product
- **A consumer durables company** looking to drive brand awareness and affinity
- **A global manufacturer of consumer electronics** looking to improve product concept testing

Contact Big Village for more information on effectively integrating consumer input into your brands' decision.

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