

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

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EXPERT COMMENTARY

This Month: Dev Patnaik, Jump Associates

INSIGHT INTO ACTION: MAKING THE CONNECTION

In recent years, many companies have turned to non-traditional methods of market and user research. Looking to develop new sources of innovation, these firms have adopted methods as interesting as ethnography and as exotic as hypnotism. You've probably heard story after story of how interviewing customers or videotaping store purchases is giving firms the winning insight that changed the game.

Even as firms are seeing the value in non-traditional research techniques, many are finding it hard to transform those findings into actionable directions for product development. I've met more than a few firms who spent a lot of time and money on a research project only to have the results end up at the bottom of a file cabinet. Or to have the development team stare at the material, shrug, and go off and do what they wanted to do from the start. Little by little, we're realizing that the greatest challenge isn't in getting insights about customers – it's in making the connection between insights and actions.

What I've learned is that techniques such as ethnography provide invaluable ways to learn what keeps your customers up at night. When these methods fall short, it's because the team hasn't successfully adapted its processes to accommodate innovative approaches to customer research.

Product developers speak different languages. Engineers often like information presented as numbers and diagrams. Their friends over in industrial design prefer to learn through pictures, if not first hand experience. The folks in marketing are still different; a lot of them like to think in words. Social researchers often present findings as pages of written text. Marketers like that just fine, but it leaves the engineers suspicious and the designers shrugging their shoulders. If you want to make research useful to all developers, you need a "Rosetta Stone." For example, try presenting the same information as text, video and quantitative breakouts.

Designers like to experience things first hand. A study was done recently at the Illinois Institute of Technology on the benefit of research to design. A group of industrial designers was asked to spend time visiting with customers to understand a particular topic. A second group, made up of trained social researchers, was given the same task. Both groups were asked to write a report of what they saw. The social researchers created a vivid description of the situation. The designers' report was another matter entirely. Information was poorly recorded. Wild assertions were made without any real support. Then, the engineers and designers were asked to take what they had learned and create product concepts. The social researchers were asked to teach another group of designers what they had learned, and have those designers generate some product concepts. Guess what? The designers who had done the research themselves ran rings around the ones who hadn't. While they couldn't articulate what they learned as well in a report, the designers who had experienced things first hand had acquired a great deal of tacit knowledge that they then brought to bear on the problem. There's simply no substitute for *being there*.

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Major breakdowns can occur even before the project starts, and that's the issue of goals. Anthropology, sociology and psychology are all much closer to *pure sciences* than they are to *applied subjects* like engineering. That is to say, a lot of what these subjects seek to do is *descriptive*. They're characterizing a situation for the sake of understanding. Most of us in product development, however, seek to be *prescriptive*. It's simply unacceptable for us to study a situation, and come back and say "*they're just fine; leave 'em alone.*" We seek to understand our customers' situations so that we can *change* them, hopefully for the better.

At the same time, product developers show up on the scene with their own baggage. Many of us follow Steven Covey's credo and begin with the end in mind. We already know what the answer is going to be and are looking for customer research to validate our beliefs. It's important to understand that if research comes up with insights that seem counter-intuitive to you, those insights are probably twice as valuable. After all, the chances are that your competitors are still banking on the conventional wisdom.

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In many ways, the challenges that product developers face when integrating non-traditional research techniques into the product development process aren't so different from the challenges of any interdisciplinary team. New methods call for a new understanding, and a change in mindset. When that happens, the insights that teams discover turn into powerful new product innovations that leave the competition behind.^P_d

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