

ZMET and Customer Feedback

Posted on Feb 16, 2012, Posted by [Val Workman](#) Category [Product Management](#)

"So what do you boys want to do?"

I've had the opportunity to observe young Boy Scout leaders across the United States ask this question over and over again. I cringe every time I hear it. Don't get me wrong, they mean well. Those new Scout Masters want to be sure the program they're planning is one the boys will be interested in. Much like the concepts of market-driven products, and new Product Managers, they mean well.

But I'll tell you what, there's no way the members of the Scout Troop could answer that question. Do they know the resources you have available to you? Do they know how much time you intend to commit to Boy Scouts? Do they know what you're capable of? No. This isn't the worse part. They haven't even heard of the fun stuff life has to offer them. They're just teenagers, they've never even dreamed of the fun stuff I do. There is just no way that the members of my Scout Troup could tell me what they wanted to do until they've done a few things with me.

Now, if you as a product manager go out to your customers and ask them what they want. Guess what you'll hear. You'll hear the echoes of your own marketing if you're lucky. More than likely you'll hear the echoes of your competitors' marketing. Let me ask you, do your customers know the resources you have available? Do they know how much time you intend to commit to new innovation? Do they know what you're capable of? Are they the experts in the field? Maybe more so than the Boy Scouts, but the analogy still holds.

When folks told you about market sensing and customer feedback, like the new Scout Master you figured you'd just walk up to your customers and ask. Sometime this works, but most of the time you'll just hear the echoes and shadows on the cave wall. Things have to become slightly

more sophisticated if you want to identify the hidden needs of your market. In my past blogs I've mentioned some of these methods. I'd like to introduce you to yet another.

The Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET) is very interesting in context of market sensing. My purpose in this posting isn't to make you a practitioner of ZMET, or even understand the science behind it. My purpose is to introduce you to it, to make you aware of it, and hold it as evidence that the problem ZMET addresses is real, and you need to be aware of it. How you address this problem is for later. For now, ZMET is evidence that needs reviewing. While reviewing ZMET, we'll recognize that the problem ZMET addresses is real, and needs addressing when talking about customer feedback.

I believe Harvard Professor Gerald Zaltman is the inventor of ZMET. He argues that consumers can't express what they're thinking, partly because their thoughts may not be clear and partly because much of the communication is nonverbal. ZMET focuses on explaining the "why" behind the "what" of consumer behavior, and uses a multidisciplinary approach to improve the results of regular qualitative research. The assertion is that latent customer needs cannot be articulated without methods like ZMET.

There are multiple flavors of the ZMET today, with an impressive list of companies who have used the method, such as Coca-Cola, DuPont, Eastman Kodak, and General Motors. The Process of ZMET involves selecting a study group, say "Customers who hate product feature X", then asking that study group a question like "What are your thoughts and feelings about using feature X?". The participants in the study group then prepare a collection of photos that answer that question. There are interviews conducted that last about two hours a piece. Most participants spend a lot of time thinking about their images, and become deeply involved in the topic. They begin by telling how each image relates to the research topic. Techniques such as asking the interviewee which images are missing, having them sort the "most representative pictures" and so on ... help uncover respondent's mental maps . Finally, participants discuss the images, create a collage, and record a short text about the meaning of the collage. Then comes the analysis.



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