



The Voice of the Customer: How Market Research Leads To Product Success

By Dennis Turner

What is the best way to truly understand your customers' needs? That's right, just ask them. It seems simple enough, however many companies and product development teams omit this vital step in the process.

Why Is Research So Vital?

For the companies who engage in market research the findings are invaluable. The information captured during research exposes consumers' likes and dislikes of a product and its features. It gives a glimpse of the future of a product or category and often generates new concept direction. Research gives the design team a look into the consumers' mind and an opportunity to tweak designs to compare one against the other until the final design is exactly what the consumer wants and the price he is willing to pay. Compare it to an eye exam. As the doctor flips the lens, the patient tells him which is better. The same applies to product research, giving the designer the best opportunity to hit a homerun.

In addition to capturing the emotional and behavioral response of a product, research can also raise a red flag when you are heading in the wrong direction. For example, if focus groups of parents tell you they will not pay \$100 for a certain type of toy as it is presented; you can almost guarantee that it will fail on the market if you ignore their warnings. This finding is certainly invaluable when you compare the cost of re-evaluating the product to the cost of failing in the market place.

As markets and consumer expectations change, knowing who your customer is and how they spend their money becomes more and more important. And, just when you think you know who the customer is and what they need or want, it changes. Research gives strong evidence of who the customer is and how to best reach them. More importantly, when used over a period of time, trends and market changes can become more easily identified. Analyzing the history of the research also reminds the team how the customer and the product have changed over its lifecycle, which may lead to new areas of interest for future product development.

As consumers have become more savvy, so have retail buyers. They have come to expect companies to perform due diligence as proof that a new concept, category or design will be successful. The most effective way to do this is to present the new product through the eyes of the consumer, through market research. Without this, you must rely on cold statistics, studies and your "gut feel".

In addition, rising product liability concerns have increased the need for product research. Understanding how users interact with products and the assembly, use and misuse of products has quickly become an important effort in liability consideration. Fortunately, liability concerns can often be seamlessly tied into many research methods, allowing companies to gather demographic, preference, market, trend and liability data with the same research program.



Types of Market Research

Market research can be very flexible, based on project needs and budget. There are several research methods that can be used throughout the product development process.



Focus groups

Focus groups typically consist of a group of participants and a moderator. The moderator asks the group questions to begin interactive dialogue. This research method is an excellent way to learn why people make the choices they do. The group dynamics often leads to uncovering new ideas and unidentified needs.

Mall Intercepts and Surveys

While focus groups concentrate on the “whys”, surveys focus on “what proportion”. Surveys can be implemented as a mall intercept, where consumers are individually interviewed in a mall or retail establishment, by telephone or through an online survey. All of these methods can successfully gather quantitative information quickly and accurately, however due to intellectual property concerns, care should be taken when using online surveys to gain opinions on concept sketches, etc.



Observation Studies

Observation research studies, a less formal research method, add a unique perspective to how consumers interact with products. By simply watching consumers interact with products in stores, you can gain great insight into their preferences and how products compete on the retail shelf.

Trend Research

Trend research should be considered during the brainstorming and concept phases of the product development process. Trend research often results in new category development and unexpected product applications. This is exactly how a new version of a classic themed product became a best seller at Target. While the Catalyst design team worked to address consumer assembly issues of an item currently in the market, they identified a niche opportunity that was a perfect fit for their client. After recognizing a grass roots affection for a nostalgic stool design, the team presented the idea of re-introducing the [stool design](#) to the client’s marketing team, but with modern improvements for the mass market. Just like that, Catalyst had identified an opportunity that became hugely successful simply by taken the unbeaten path during trend research. This type of research can include things like internet research, retail audits, industry and non-industry related trade shows or other events to name a few.





Choosing the Research Team

The people included in the research team can range from corporate level management to marketing assistants. Market research companies may also be included for the design, facilitation and data analysis of the program. However, for product specific research, studies show that the inclusion of product designers (internal or external) plays a valuable role for several reasons.

First, designers view the world from a unique perspective. They can often capture and sketch participants' ideas on the spot for clarification. This is particularly valuable when weeding out product concepts or brainstorming new concepts.

Second, a strong designer takes personal ownership in his designs. Since designers are intimate with the product, they offer valuable input on things like questions that are asked and what type or how many concepts should be included in the research. In addition, the design team may need feedback in areas that other members of the team may not consider as valuable. Designers want to understand customer needs and expectations, but in order to do that, they need to see and hear the participants' feedback first hand. Both positive and negative feedback challenge the design team to see their concepts through the eyes of the consumer. It challenges them to dig deeper into their design not only to meet consumer expectations, but to exceed them.

The few product development companies who understand the importance and value that research adds to the product development process actually integrate market research services into their process. While careful not to let the market research consume the team, budget and timeline, they and their clients often rely on research results to validate concept direction, cost/value clarification and feature/benefit preference.

As odd as it may sound, market research results are often considered among the list of "authorities" during the decision-making process, especially since research results should be reviewed by non-linear disciplines within the group. Consider this example: marketing team members will tune into cost/value comments and suggestions while product designers will most likely focus on ergonomic/style feedback. At the same time, engineering representatives will weigh fit and function comments more heavily than others. Relying on only one of these interpretations is short-sided, leaving significant opportunity on the table. It is the *combination* of these perspectives and the pure, honest consumer feedback that helps companies determine product direction with confidence.

Market Research Leads to Product Success

The inclusion of market research in the product development process can often make the difference between success and failure. Rather than assuming the team has all of the answers, engaging in one or more of these research methods can confirm your position, raise a red flag to a potential issue, identify a new opportunity, validate cost versus value or give them a new perspective on how their product is used and perceived in the marketplace. Market research increases the opportunity for success by removing all of the guess work and understanding your customers' wants, needs and expectations simply by asking them!