

## Can You Hear Me Now?



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**Example One:** A large global cereal manufacturer needs to make their product more relevant to consumers. They know that people are not getting enough fiber and whole grains. For some, white processed flour is viewed as evil. Unfortunately, some of their not-perceived-as-healthy cereals command a beloved following by adults and kids and don't taste quite as good when reformulated into a whole-grain version. One consumer, a mother of two young children, pours out her favorite cereal one morning expecting the same great taste. Ugh...it tastes awful! She writes to tell this company she will never buy the cereal again. What happens? She receives a nice letter from the company saying that people like her have told them to change their product and that she should taste the reformulated product they have just sent her and use the coupon to buy the new product when it comes out! And P.S.—the new reformulation tastes as good as the original product!

**Example Two:** Sugary cereals can be just like candy if one eats them too often or without the balance of other cereals. They offer marvelous taste and texture. So why would anyone mess up this

wonderful product by, for example, reducing the sugar, using non-nutritive sweeteners, and totally destroying its awesome flavor profile? Because the Center for Science in the Public Interest said so? In this case, the approach did not work and the product described in this example is off the market. Who wins?

What is the point of these two rants? If the companies had listened more to their consumers, they could have realized that the current consumer base is happy with the way their existing products perform. They don't want their product changed.

How do such unfortunate missteps come to pass? How could large, savvy marketing companies miss hearing what their customers say?

For the past decade, understanding consumers has become a key driver for product development. Momentum has been growing regarding the need to understand unmet consumer needs and wants. As both marketers and product developers seek

“secret” insights into consumer thinking, the methods of interacting with consumers have changed.

We have gone from observing consumer reactions to new product stimuli in controlled environments to entering the consumers' actual eating environments to understand how they actually use products and why. All of us have looked to both organizations and methodologies to find the insights we need. Conferences and seminars by organizations like AACC International, the American Marketing Association, the Product Development and Management Association, the Institute of Food Technologists, and ESOMAR promise to introduce us to companies and individuals who will share with us the secrets of how to unlock the elusive minds of consumers.

Orthodox methods such as focus groups and taste tests have been both celebrated and vilified for producing both right and wrong insights (3,5). To build on the saying “You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink,” what if the best consumer-research techniques lead us to the water (consumer), but we refuse or are unable to drink from the available knowledge? As companies ramp up product development activities with shorter innovation cycles, the need to understand more quickly and more thoroughly what consumers have to say becomes critical. The two examples illustrated above demonstrate how companies can fail to understand or hear what their customers are saying, despite having good consumer testing tools in place.

The world we live in is one of constant interruptions, one that juxtaposes boredom with excitement (4). We spend time in long meetings to make group decisions that require forceful applications of political skill and fast thinking just to move projects forward. No one in the group has enough power to individually move the team forward. The constant juxtaposition of fast responses with activities that require thought and political skill can leave us jaded, overwhelmed, and less able to focus on other people's ideas and inputs.

Furthermore, we live in technological bubbles that can be customized to filter-in only what we want to hear, watch, or do. Or we can enter worlds of virtual reality, such as Internet gaming, where you can create anyone that you want to be. In this world, we do not have to learn or create internal behavior changes for others because the world is manipulated to reflect what we want it to be (2).

Why does this matter with understanding consumers? It matters a lot. Ethnographies, observational research, even focus groups require listening to hear. Yet more importantly, focused listening is needed to learn.

To leverage impactful insights from consumers into a project generally means that some sort of learning must happen for the team. When companies want to go fast, this learning has to happen not only faster, but more clearly for the team.

The expectation is that going to a focus group or participating in observational research will create a long-term change in the options that will be considered for the team members who

participated. However, what often happens is that the team embarks on this journey as if entering the world of entertainment via consumers. The problem is that as viewers we have been trained to expect an edited, entertaining product, whether that come in the form of TV, Internet gaming experiences, or social networking experiences. The reality is that focus groups are not entertainment, but rather real life. The experience is simply too passive.

So how do we make listening to consumers more impactful for the individual and the team?

Learning theory helps us understand how to listen better. Learning theory (Gagne conditions) (1) suggests that there are different levels of learning and outlines nine instructional events and the cognitive processes that go with these events:

- 1) Gaining attention (reception);
- 2) Informing learners of the objective (expectancy);
- 3) Stimulating recall of prior learning (retrieval);
- 4) Presenting the stimulus (selective perception);
- 5) Providing learning guidance (semantic encoding);
- 6) Eliciting performance (responding);
- 7) Providing feedback (reinforcement);
- 8) Assessing performance (retrieval); and
- 9) Enhancing retention and transfer (generalization).

For this column, we have applied this thinking to see if we can create a grounded understanding about why it is so hard for teams to really listen to consumers (and therefore apply the knowledge).

**1. Gaining attention.** When teams listen to consumers, their listening is competing with other more entertaining options, i.e. connecting and talking with other team members, answering e-mails and cell phone messages, and eating M&M's.

**Solution:** Consumer hearing is a team activity. Even though you may have someone who is interacting with the consumer(s) in the front room or via teleconference, you need a person leading the listening and hearing in the backroom.

**2. Informing learners of the objective.** Initially, a team walks in with an objective to learn how consumers respond to ideas or how they use products, but it becomes easy to forget the objective after viewing and experiencing hours of unedited slow consumer behavior.

**Solution:** There must be someone with the job of reminding the team on a regular basis of why they are doing this work and why they are participating or they will lose focus on their objectives.

**3. Recall prior learning.** Did the team review what they know of different consumer models of behavior or did they just show up?

**Solution:** Spend the time before the listening event to create expected models of behavior so that either these models are confirmed or disconfirmed.

**4. Present stimulus.** This happens as the leader of the discussion with consumers presents ideas, products, etc. If the team has not actively been involved in why specific stimuli were chosen and why stimuli A is different from stimuli B, then they don't know why consumers may respond differently.

**Solution:** Understand why certain questions want to be answered and what stimuli will be needed to try to evoke the responses that will get these questions answered. And then monitor the listening and hearing to see if this is happening.

**5. Guide learning.** If there is no jointly created model of consumer behavior, then there is no guide to learning.

**Solution:** Create the model, use the model, and adapt the model based on the results. This needs to be driven by one person who engages with the team adaptively.

**6. Elicit performance.** This happens as consumers create a wide variety of actual usages of the product or respond to the ideas. What is difficult for the team is to be able to pick out the differences in consumers and the different usage models consumers are showing the team. The team ends up with too much to watch and too much going on.

**Solution:** Understanding what is common and what is unique is essential to reducing these models down to a few consumer segments. Prior to the listening event, plan on what you might expect to hear and then track the listening and hearing and compare it to your expectations.

**7. Provide feedback.** This is the intense discussion the team should be having in the backroom. This is the check of "did everyone get it?"

**Solution:** Make sure that the essential questions that are being asked of the consumers are written and available for all team members to read and understand during the consumer test. If possible, include hypotheses of what was expected. Check during the activity to see if this prior thinking is being confirmed or not and discuss why or why not in order to get closer to the hoped for outcome.

**8. Assess performance.** Usually after all of the time watching consumers, everyone is tired. It might be late, other things have come up, and it can be hard to refocus on the initial listening and hearing adventure.

**Solution:** The team must plan for the immediate review of the learning and hearing results and then needs to uncover what was learned and whether or not it met the criteria of the established models or why the results were surprising. While an individual may need to lead this effort, it is a team responsibility. It is too important to the essentials of good listening to leave it to any single individuals to summarize what was learned and what was not.

**9. Enhance retention and transfer.** This is where the team has learned enough from consumers to transfer the knowledge to product development. Without the previous eight steps, step nine will fail to occur. The key here is to get out of your own way.

**Solution:** The planning and preparation that we have talked about in the other steps should anticipate how to retain this knowledge, how to communicate its impact to the organization, and how the transfer of knowledge can occur. Developing a meaningful way to implement long-term knowledge transfer is important, but, alas, this is generally lacking in a lot of organizations!

Listening, hearing, and learning are multimodal. They are not simple. When we put consumers in a focus group or participate in observational research, it requires a process with designated roles played by team members.

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