



Customer Interviews and Focus Groups

Introduction

Do you *know* your customers? For many, the main avenue for getting to know customers is through online surveys or rating mechanisms. Ratings and comments are crucial for knowing how your business is doing, but would you say you knew a person if your only interaction had been through a ratings system? Probably not. What if instead you had a half-hour conversation with a customer? You are likely to learn a fair bit about a person in that amount of time, even if the topic of conversation is, incidentally, your customer's thoughts on your product or service. Through several such conversations, you can really start to say you "know" your customers, in the sense of being acquainted or connected. Your customer, in a way, already has a relationship with you (with what you're selling) before you talk to them—but talking to them helps you better understand what that relationship is like, and *why* that relationship exists at all.

This guide looks at person-to-person methods (non-automated methods) for better understanding your customers and competitors. It will cover:

- How to conduct customer interviews
- Why use a focus group?

Customer Interviews

Customer interviews are often neglected, even in the for-profit world, but can yield great insights that might not be obtainable through surveys.

Interviews are great for:

- Uncovering needs and perceptions you didn't expect
- Getting beyond your own/your company's current marketing perspective
- Learning the language of your customers so you can refine your messaging
- Building connections for future feedback
- Creating richer customer personas

What makes interviews different from surveys:

- Surveys tend to work best for short, specific questions, whereas interviews work best as more open-ended, exploratory processes. Response rate on surveys tends to go down with more written-response questions.
- Open-ended questions leave more room for unexpected responses; these types of questions don't work as well in surveys because they tend to require too much typing.
- Allows for immediate "drilling down" at a level (and immediacy) not generally obtainable in written form.
- Connecting directly with customers builds empathy, deeper understanding, and a greater concern for their needs

Below are some guidelines and advice on interviews. The biggest takeaway is to keep interviews focused on your customer's experience rather than your own ideas and theories. New ideas can often be more easily addressed in a multiple-choice survey question.

Logistics

Phone calls usually work best. Tell them to allow for 30 minutes so you don't rush the call. Shoot for 5-7 interviewees per customer category, per cycle (frequency of cycles up to you). This amount of interviewees is usually enough to start seeing trends. While transcribing and cataloging interviews is a must, you may also want to record the conversations so that you or other staff can go back and hear vocal inflections and nuance. If you choose to record the interviews, you must let the interviewee know that they are being recorded.

Interview tips and ideas

Be careful what you ask. Be sure to:

- Avoid asking what customers think about your new idea (as in, "would you like it if ___"), since they will likely support your idea just to be nice.
- Avoid asking future-oriented/prediction questions if possible. The past is a much better predictor of future behavior.
- Don't put words in their mouths or try to steer. People can easily sense being led in a direction, and may try to tell you what you want to hear.
- Ask open ended questions that elicit in-depth responses/stories, and probe when appropriate.
- Allow moments of silence, rather than jumping to the next question. Interviewees will often offer more information to fill the silence. You can also ask "What else can you tell me?"

Look for *why* and *how* your customer uses your product:

- Why do they like your product? What excites them? There may be a deeper 'why' to any answer—hone in on emotional motivations.
- How do they use your product? Or in what context? Personal use, events, work-related, or as gifts?
- What words do they use to describe the good qualities about your product/brand? These descriptive words can be used verbatim in ads to 'speak your customers' language'
- What do they dislike (either about your product or another brand), or wish you provided?
- Are there things you think people care about that never get mentioned? These qualities might not be as important as you thought.
- How do they view your competitors?

Example questions can include:

- Tell me about what you look for when buying this type of product.
- What do you use our product for (i.e. this type of product)?
- Tell me about a time when you were considering which (x product) to buy—
 - What pros and cons were you thinking about when deciding which to buy?
- What's your typical buying process for this type of product?
 - What happens and who's involved?
- Tell me about a time you used our product.
- How do you feel about our products? service? brand?
- What other brands do you buy?
 - What do you like/dislike about them?
 - Do they serve a different purpose/occasion for you from our product?
- Who do you consider our competitors, and what could we learn from them?

Example of an interview insight

In Roadmap to Revenue, Kristin Zhivago details a great example of an interview insight where Febreze changed its positioning in response to an insight gained from a customer interview. Febreze interviewed a housewife who kept an immaculately clean home. She said she sprayed Febreze as part of her room-cleaning habit, not (as previously imagined) to combat nose-pummeling odors. She said “It’s nice, you know? Spraying feels like a little mini-celebration when I’m done with a room.” That insight triggered an analysis that led to realizing they needed to position Febreze as part of an existing cleaning routine – and as a reward for cleaning a room. As a result, the company added perfume to the bottle and launched new ads showing women spritzing freshly made beds with Febreze. Within two months, sales of the product doubled.

Insights like this emphasize the value of specificity—homing in on exactly how your product or service provides unique value in peoples’ lives. If people are already buying from you, there is likely something special about what you are currently offering. Perhaps by understanding what that is you can help new customers understand what current customers have already caught on to.

Focus Groups

As with live interviews, focus groups involve person to person interaction, and are similarly geared toward in-depth, nuanced insights about perception more so than data points. However, whereas interviews tend to involve customers who have made a purchase, focus groups are well-suited to that non-customer category discussed at the beginning of this guide.

While surveys and interviews do involve a fair bit of planning, strategizing, and finessing, they can usually be carried out relatively well by an untrained team. Focus groups, on the other hand, tend to be more complicated and difficult to pull off, so an experienced focus group consultant is usually hired on to help plan and execute the process. That person must fill the important role of moderator during focus group sessions, which requires strong leadership and interpersonal skills.

A focus group often involves participants observing or using your product alongside other similar products from competitors. In many cases, company staff observe participants through one-way glass so that they do not feel inhibited in giving harsh opinions. Participants may then be asked to discuss their reactions to each product in relation to the others, and to rate them on various scales. In order to keep responses unbiased, participant(s) are likely unaware of which brand is responsible for the focus group session.

The bottom line is that focus groups are a uniquely powerful way to understand how potential customers view your product or website and how you stack up in relation to competitors, especially from a first-impression perspective.

Conclusion

There are many benefits to having person-to-person connections as part of your market analysis toolbox. In the age of digital connections, sometimes personal connection is forgotten—but the good news is that these types of interactions are not out of reach. As you have probably experienced in your work environment, sometimes it’s just best to take a conversation off of email and go talk with your coworker. Perhaps we should simply think of customers as external coworkers.