

## How to Listen to Your (B2B) Customers

December 2010 newsletter

Consumers are easy. There they are: in your store; on your website; tethered to their smartphones. But how do you reach business people, who, just like yourself, are hard to find, resistant to conversation and unwilling to divulge?

How can you engage your customers so that you can understand what is really driving their buying decisions? In this newsletter we will explore how qualitative research can get at the essence of B2B behavior patterns that determine the success or failure of your enterprise.

In the normal course of business you may have many opportunities to talk to your customers and these conversations are often very useful. But to develop a truly customer-centric marketing strategy, you need more than casual conversations.

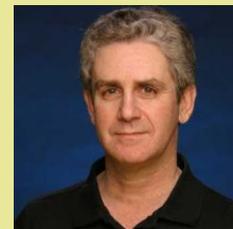
At first glance this might sound pretty easy. Just pick up the phone and start dialing. But to gain critical insights into the mind and emotions of your customers, you will need a more formal approach that involves them on three increasingly deeper levels:

- **Acceptance.** There are many barriers to gaining acceptance to your invitation to talk: logistical (how do you find busy people?); confidentiality (will they talk without such assurances?); and conflict-avoidance (why tell the truth if it provokes a conflict?). Gaining customer acceptance involves setting the appropriate incentives to encourage participation and enlisting an objective third-party interviewer to overcome their objections.
- **Engagement.** Getting a respondent to show up is obviously a good first step, but useless if they refuse to engage intellectually with the process. The way an

**This is a monthly newsletter from Prell Organization.**

**Prell Organization** is a marketing research firm that uses qualitative and quantitative methods to help our clients and their agencies see their brands more clearly.

**Brand Clarity** is a process by which consumers reveal the essence of a brand to make sure that the products and services being offered are closely aligned to their needs.



interview is structured – with softer, general questions up front – and how the interviewer enables the respondent is critical. Fortunately, once you truly connect with business people, they are usually very willing to engage deeply because of their commitment to their jobs and their industry.

- **Permission.** Qualitative research is mostly about emotions and in order to gain access to the respondent's emotions, first you must get their permission. Don't think that business people are not ruled, at least partially, by their emotions. They just hide their 'irrational' side from you, their colleagues, their superiors and even themselves. Getting at their emotional side can be particularly difficult because of their natural reticence.

We have successfully employed one-on-one in-depth interviews (IDIs) with business customers, typically getting between 30 and 50 percent to accept our invitation, and 95 percent of those who agree to talk, follow through with that commitment.

These telephone interviews, conducted by an experienced, trained qualitative moderator, last between 20 and 30 minutes – enough time to get through the respondent's defenses, but not so long as to tire them or make them non-responsive.

This methodology works better than traditional focus groups (these respondents are likely to know one another and be affected by each other's opinions) and online focus groups (some business types are resistant to – or just plain non-compliant with – online methodologies).

When you want to have a dialogue with your business customers or other channel partners, telephone IDIs not only produce a large amount of responses at a very reasonable cost, but best of all, it allows for a much deeper discussion about business motivations than is possible with any other methodology.

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