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4 ways to see your brand the way your customers view it

By Jenny Schade

Adopt a consumer's vantage point to gain salient insights about your public face

What if I told you that I've:

- Sat with heroin addicts while they faced their demons?
- Shared the hope and witnessed the awesome responsibility of an oncologist recommending a new cancer protocol?
- Celebrated the freedom of 65-year-old women "living the good life" playing slots in Las Vegas?
- Braved high school in a Chicago district with the highest crime rate and murder count?

I have conducted research with all of the "consumers" above. Gaining insight into their wants and needs was invaluable to improving services at a center that treats addiction, determining how a global pharmaceutical company should describe its services to physicians, creating new products for a company that produces video slot machines, and developing effective programming for an after-school organization for inner-city kids.

Seeing my clients through their customers' eyes and understanding their experiences provided critical insight into how to grow their businesses.

"Know thy customer" is often referred to as the first commandment of marketing. Unfortunately, it often gets overlooked or forgotten. Just ask Toyota's new North American chief, Yoshimi Inaba, who recently told *The Wall Street Journal* that he believes Toyota got "[a little bit lost](#)" in its North American strategy and fell out of touch with its customers. Toyota posted its first loss in 58 years last year and expects another loss for this fiscal year—beyond the overall automobile market's decline.

You don't have to be a professional market researcher to be in touch with your customers. There are actions you can take right now, including:

1. Get out of your office. Although your colleagues may be lovely people, they aren't your customers. It's critical to leave your workplace and observe the people whose approval you urgently need for survival—your customers.

Imagine how different America's automobile industry might be today if its top executives hadn't consistently eaten lunch in the company dining room, driven only their own company's cars and encouraged all employees to do the same. Don't make this mistake.

Observe your customers at the point of purchase. What attracts them? What distracts them? What influences their decision to buy? How might you exceed their expectations and delight them?

2. Get it straight from the source's mouth. One of the largest new business wins I ever experienced during my years working for PR firms came about because we stopped sitting around a conference table brainstorming and brought in consumers. We asked them why they bought our client's product, what it meant to them, and how they described it. Out of this meeting came "the big idea" that won us the business initially and that tripled the size of the project by the end of the year.

You can do this, too. Consider forming a customer advisory board, in which you encourage customers to share their needs and regularly provide feedback on new products or marketing approaches. You can do this through in-person meetings or online through a blog or wiki.

3. Don't put words into their mouths, pull words out of their mouths. Before you release any kind of marketing communication, bounce it off of your audience. This will help you speak your customers' language and avoid "trigger words" that incite negative emotions.

Johnson & Johnson learned this the hard way when the company posted an online ad on its Web site featuring a voiceover of a mother who said she carries her baby in a sling because she sees it as being "in fashion" and makes her look like "an official mom." Instead of laughing and buying more Motrin, mommy bloggers were offended and called for [boycotts](#). Within 24 hours, J&J pulled the ad from both its site and from magazines and posted an apology.

Avoid having to issue apologies or yank advertising by testing communications on your customers. One simple exercise involves showing marketing materials to customers and asking them to circle what they like, cross out what they don't like, and put a question mark next to anything they don't understand. This process helps identify what's effective, offensive or confusing, and it leads to stronger marketing overall.

4. Create a "verbal picture" of your customer, and keep it in sight. This may seem obvious, but it's much easier to target your customers if you know who they are and keep them in mind at all times. After completing my first three recommendations above, I recommend that my clients develop a verbal description—or verbal picture—of their customers that they keep by their desks. The description should be clear enough so that you can picture your customer when you read it. What's important to him or her? What does he or she struggle with? And how can you help?

Try to identify the tension in your customer's life that your product can solve. For example, if you sell healthy desserts, how does your customer feel about dessert? Or about healthy foods? Does she crave sweets but feel guilty when she binges on rich treats? Does she feel virtuous, but unsatisfied when she eats healthy foods? Bingo! You can position yourself as offering the best of both worlds.

Try to get into your customer's mindset, describe it for yourself, and keep your verbal picture on hand so you're always marketing to a real customer.

By the way, corporate America isn't the only one to benefit from getting insight into the needs of its customers. Washington D.C.'s first female police chief, Cathy Lanier, recently told [More](#) magazine that she has given out her cell phone number to hundreds of D.C. residents she's met on the streets. She says, "If you separate yourself from the people impacted by crime, you're going to fail."

To all those eager to offer health care to the uninsured—take note: The state of Tennessee took a novel approach to developing a successful health insurance plan by first asking uninsured state residents about what mattered most. "What I realized was this: Everyone proposing solutions or criticizing unfairness was doing so from the comfortable vantage point of having good health insurance," Gov. Phil Bredesen told *The Wall Street Journal*.

Before you talk, take a walk in your customer's shoes. You'll be glad you did.

Jenny Schade is president of [JRS Consulting, Inc.](#), a firm that helps organizations to build leading brands and efficiently attract and motivate employees and customers.