

Taking a *Long Road Trip*: International Customer Visits Lead to Global Success

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Abstract

Companies such as Ford, Lexus, and Xerox know that successful global products start with understanding the unique customer needs beyond their domestic market borders. This article, written by an experienced practitioner, provides some tips for conducting international customer visit market research, as well as some examples of insights discovered.

Over the last few years, leading product developers have learned the value of in-depth customer understanding as *the* basis for determining which new products should be developed, what product benefits and features to best provide, and what key value-chain practices in delivering, supporting, and servicing these new products lead to market success. Tools like “Voice of the Customer”, QFD, contextual inquiry, and Lead User method are now in common use among leading-edge market researchers and companies.

But firms that make products or provide services that compete on a global basis are aware that although the basic techniques and processes of gaining in-depth customer understanding are applicable to both domestic and international market research, when going beyond your borders, the devil lies in the details, and there’s no substitute for planning and experience. Here are a few tips and anecdotes to help you when considering VOC research beyond your borders.

Plan Early, and Work With Local Branches/Affiliates

If your firm is like many with a global presence, international markets may account for 50% or more of revenue. This certainly warrants including international customer visits in your market research plans as soon as you have identified the target markets and the critical product issues you need to understand. The preparation for international research is considerable and takes much longer – finding a market research vendor, translations (and checking of translations!), understanding local protocols and customs, scheduling around local holidays, and recruiting at a distance all take much longer when removed by a border, or an ocean...

If you have local subsidiaries, obtain their help and input in your research. These colleagues are invaluable in helping with translations, scheduling, setting up

customer visits and travel, and of course also have their own insights, issues and needs (as long as these don't override your research agenda). The benefits of this involvement can be great – increased buy-in for the new products, detailed customer background information prior to your visits, etc... but it is very important that the local support understand that, as always, these visits are for research, and not troubleshooting or sales generation!

Keep your cross-functional product team involved

Going beyond your domestic borders for customer visits is expensive and time-consuming, and the temptation is to leave the job to marketing – particularly if the project is already underway, and engineering is busy. But developing today's products means that many thousands of small design decisions must be made, and better that these decisions are guided by first-hand experience than by guesswork or highly filtered observations. And sending teams of engineers and marketers to meet customers is the best way to get these groups to work together.

Consider this quote from Kousuke Shiramizu, chief of Toyota's luxury car production: "Engineers who have never set foot in Beverly Hills have no business designing a Lexus. Nor has anybody who has never experienced driving on the Autobahn first-hand. It takes a lot of training, even for our white-collar staff. Their knowledge of the marketing situation on the ground must be perfect." *Business Week, September 3, 2001*

One company that makes a continuing practice of international customer observation is Ford – visits by Ford engineers to the Middle East found that some vehicles needed modification to create good fore and aft clearance (for loading onto Suez Canal ferries), and that many more tie-down points were needed in the beds of pick-up trucks when transporting camels! These first-hand observations would never be uncovered in a focus group.

Pay Attention to Local Customs and Protocols

While conducting customer visits in the Far East for Xerox Engineering Systems, our visit team was very aware that American business customs differ from those in Japan, China, Malaysia, and Singapore, and that the customs varied between those locals, also. Spend some time researching business and meeting protocol in the countries you'll be researching – for instance

- In Japan, frank discussions often don't take place at work but after hours, over dinner and drinks. And Chinese customers will want to spend time developing a personal understanding between you prior to launching into the visit interview and observations – time not on the agenda but very worthwhile in gaining awareness of the issues they face as well as forging familiarity.

- The form of incentives for survey or participation varies from place to place – small gifts are preferred in Japan, while cash is acceptable in Singapore.
- Questions about personal issues, such as income or lifestyle, acceptable in the US - may be considered very intrusive in some countries.
- Although English is the worldwide language for technology, making sure the true meaning of the Voice of the Customer is gained means that translation (and re-translation back to verify accuracy) is necessary. In one case, our focus group was conducted by translating from English to Mandarin to Shanghai-eze and then back again – tedious but necessary to gain true understanding. Using professional translators is ideal but expensive – on the other hand using bilingual employees of your firm saves money but risks losing valuable customer verbatim and introducing their own biases.

It's also necessary that your team be aware of the social customs and taboos in the countries they'll be visiting. Information on "multi-cultural manners" can be found on the web or in several books. Examples are:

- Hand gestures common in the US, such as "thumbs-up" or clasp the thumb and forefinger to indicate "OK" are obscene gestures in countries like Australia and Brazil.
- There is disapproval in using a handkerchief in public in Japan.
- Recording a conversation is unthinkable in some cultures, and interview skills useful in the US, such as leaning forward in interest, or maintaining direct eye contact may be very poor manners elsewhere.

Check on the cultural aspects of respectful behavior before your visit. A little prior research can avoid a great deal of embarrassment!

No Substitute for Being There – With Eyes Open

As is true with many Voice of the Customer visits, sometimes that greatest gains are made in the observations and artifacts, not in the discussion. This is particularly true in visiting foreign customers – who often have unique requirements:

- ATM machines in Sweden have very large buttons, to accommodate heavily gloved hands.

- Copiers in China have to contend with temperature and power extremes never seen in US offices, because many Chinese offices (particularly north of the Yangtze River) turn off the power and heat after 4 P.M. Copier equipment in Malaysia and Singapore benefited from additional heaters to keep the paper dry in a very humid environment.
- Copier users in China were very concerned about the health risks of the ozone produced by the machines, to the extent of adding elaborate filters and ducting to the copiers – even though the machines met stringent worldwide emission requirements.
- Japanese consumers favor quietness over power in household appliances like vacuum cleaners – the close quarters and thin walls of Japanese houses makes quiet a more desirable feature than in other parts of the world.

We have found that teaming the marketing people with an engineering team member who takes a systems perspective, and exhibits great curiosity in general, yields the unique usage observations that result in improved product acceptance in foreign markets. The customization needed for foreign market acceptance is often easily designed in up-front, or can be added with a “nationalization kit” delivered with the product – bringing the needed changes “closer to the customer” and avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” offering.

Keep an Evergreen Worldwide Database

After you’ve collected and distilled your international data, make the effort to create an “international requirements database”, so that the unique country-by-country observations and needs are readily accessible for future projects. Doing so creates the dual benefits of recording unique international product requirements while also providing the basis for future investigations to avoid “re-inventing the wheel” in re-discovering prior knowledge.

Payoffs outweigh the pain...

The initial effort to conduct international customer research can seem daunting, but starting with the tips presented here, and not making the assumption that techniques that work in the US work everywhere, can make the effort create high leverage in products that delight both your domestic and global customers at very little incremental development expense. The key is to enable the globalized product attributes early in the design, so that an expensive foreign product failure is avoided.

About the Author

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