

## Getting into customers' heads

Sometimes, at the end of a heroic development effort, we find lukewarm prospects instead of purchase-order-waving customers. How can we get inside our prospects' heads early in the product cycle so that our "next new thing" meets their needs and desires? Or...



Paraphrasing Freud's famous question about women, "What do customers want?"

This question generates a ton of frustration in both early-stage and later-stage companies. Marketing and Sales are frustrated by Engineering's inability to build products that do what customers want. Engineering repeatedly complains about "incomplete requirements." It often becomes an argument about what we think customers should want.

The most effective way to find out what early-stage customers want is to ask. (Gasp!) Individually. In detail. With our mouths shut.

Large consumer products companies have spent decades fine-tuning focus groups and lifestyle interviews to learn how we feel about shampoo or toothpaste. Similarly, established technology firms have an installed base of customers to survey. How does a start-up attack this problem, especially when it may not yet have a product built or any paying customers?

One successful approach is the "customer use case" – sometimes called a deployment scenario. It describes in exquisite detail how one customer might take advantage of our new thing. In my experience, it may only take four or five solid use cases to discover the commonalities hiding among these quirky early customer situations.

Borrowing lightly from Sigmund's couch therapy, I like to meet with one thoughtful prospect at a time in a relaxed setting, get her/him talking, then try to listen for a solid hour. Having a white board and a second person to take notes allows some steering toward needs and details:

- What is their core business: making hats, transplanting kidneys or trading stocks?
- Where is the pain? Is the buyer awake at night fretting about defect rates, flagging innovation or lost shipments? We need to hear the customer's own words here, not our hoped-for answers. ("We're always out of stock on the hottest-selling dress, but overstocked on last week's favorite...")
- What constitutes success? Some customers are obsessed with cost savings, others want to reduce downtime or get home in time for dinner. ("Prove that you can reduce commodity trading time by two seconds, and I'll buy twenty of your servers.")
- How the problem is being solved today -- since our product isn't yet available? Hint: we'll have to fit into the same architecture as the thing we replace.
- How much does today's solution cost? True operational savings is the best sales pitch in 2002.
- What requirements did the customer specifically call out? Which requirements are so obvious as to be unspoken?
- Are we a fit? Should we pursue this opportunity or run like the wind?

Afterwards, the rest of the team should get a short write-up [like this example](#). It lets everyone immerse themselves in the details of a real-world situation, which is much more reliable than Freud's dream interpretations.

### *Sound Bytes*

Nailing down a few hard-nosed customer use cases is the fastest way to move from "I hope" to "Several customers have told us." Nothing focuses a development team faster than a product champion who can really describe what customers want. Feel free to pass it off as mind reading.

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