



CUSTOMER INSIGHTS:

Using Images to Evolve Your B2B Customer Experience

BY CHAD MCCLLOUD

BUSINESSES HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME unlocking the true motivations behind customer behavior. Using innovative techniques to uncover customer insights can lead to a differentiating customer experience.

People tend to have difficulty explaining exactly why they like a product or experience, yet Voice of the Customer (VoC) is most B2B companies' method of choice for driving customer input. But just try to answer these questions: What does your favorite brand mean to you? Why did you purchase the last gift you bought for someone else? Can you describe your ideal customer experience?

Questions like those make my head spin, because my behaviors, opinions, and decisions are driven as much by emotion as they are by logic.

Businesses that measure customer input solely via surveys and focus groups run the risk of deriving insights that miss the real drivers of customer behavior. My future actions with a company may be unintentionally different from what I can verbalize. When's the last time you bought a candy bar because "you needed a pick-me-up," when you really just had a craving for chocolate?

Fortunately, uncovering customer insights has evolved in amazing ways. Gerald Zaltman, a Harvard Business School professor, has developed an innovative technique for unearthing the hidden drivers of customer behavior. The ZMET® (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique*) asks customers to capture images that illustrate their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about a brand, product, or experience. Conversations with the customers then reveal what's behind those images, which lead to some really interesting insights.

Here's an example. A ZMET participant described the image that for her illustrated the brand of a large university in the Midwest the following way: "A red barn stands alone in the middle of a

field. It's weathered, and the paint is chipping, but the foundation of the barn is structurally strong. The barn performs its duty without complaint, and the man who owns the barn takes great care of the functionality it provides. The barn also has a basketball hoop, but unlike the paint job, the hoop has a brand new net."

Those images drove a set of qualities – reliability, good work ethic, honesty, loyalty, strength, tradition, pride, and toughness – that helped define the brand experience for the university.

The ZMET has been a mainstay of the consumer packaged goods industry for years. Brand managers are always interested in shaping marketing campaigns that resonate deeply with their consumer base.

Today, B2B companies are taking a second look at using the technique for everything from product innovation to customer experience evolution. Here are five reasons for doing so:

1. EXPERIENCE COMPLEXITY

The number and diversity of interactions in a B2B relationship can make it difficult for companies to describe the quality of the customer experience. A customer survey response that states "you guys are just too difficult to work with," can refer to anything from too many servicing interactions to a problematic negotiating relationship. Images can help clarify the experience via metaphors, which can lead to actionable improvements in the B2B customer experience.

2. RELATIONSHIP COMPLEXITY

The number of people and functions that interact in a B2B relationship heighten the importance of providing the right experience. Images can provide insight into what it's like for those who experience the purchase, use, and support of a company's products or services.

3. UBIQUITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Ten years ago, subjects were given disposable cameras to capture their images. Cameras were cumbersome to provide, inconvenient for participants to use, and even more problematic to retrieve. Today, more than half of US adults have a digital camera on their person (in the form of mobile phones), and images can be sent electronically with the push of a

button. Furthermore, the technique can be expanded to include video on top of static images. The administration of the technique couldn't be easier or more convenient for all involved.

4. UNIQUENESS OF APPROACH

Think about how many times you're asked to participate in "one more survey" (my email inbox is filled with unopened invitations). B2B companies are always struggling with poor participation rates and results that are clearly not as thorough as desired. The ZMET provides customers with a unique, enjoyable, and thought-provoking exercise. It breaks through the clutter and provides a halo of innovation over the companies that use it.

5. MY COMPANY GETS IT!

Customer survey results are great, but nothing gets people's attention like an image or a video. Images resonate with those providing that customer experience long after a passing survey. Images help ensure that organizations make evolving and improving the customer experience a priority.

A picture is worth a thousand words, as the saying goes, but a metaphor is worth a thousand pictures. Here's to unlocking your customers' hidden behaviors via image-borne metaphors.

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* ZMET is a patented research tool developed by Gerald Zaltman

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