

Subject line: Subtle work-arounds reveal new product and service opportunities

## **Find the screwdriver**

**Customers sometimes create their own solutions for product shortcomings.**

Traditional research methods such as focus groups and surveys have been taking a bashing lately because many companies have tried (and failed) to create new value propositions based on the spoken or written opinions of focus group participants.

Even under the guidance of a skilled moderator, focus group panelists often feel peer pressure to offer like-minded and narrowly formulated opinions that are politically correct. But the biggest problem with using focus groups and surveys is that they don't uncover the huge source of ideas found in the everyday work-arounds consumers create to make up for inherent flaws in a product or service.

**Package interaction is often overlooked.**

For years Procter and Gamble made Tide detergent in heavy-duty cardboard boxes that were manufacturing friendly, transported well without damage and fit properly on store shelves. Innovation had focused on improving the detergent's performance, something that traditional research found that consumers wanted, but little attention was paid to packaging.

One day, while conducting in-home observational research, a P&G researcher noticed a screwdriver next to a freshly opened box of Tide. The researcher asked the consumer if she ever had problems opening the box, to which she replied "no." The screwdriver had become an accepted tool needed to open the box and the consumer was completely unaware that her work-around might be eliminated through better package design.

In fact, the need for that screwdriver to conveniently open the box would probably never have come to light in a focus group or survey setting.

**How do consumers measure clean?**

Another consumer packaged goods company was conducting a study on floor cleaning products. For years, makers of floor cleaners have trained consumers that "shiny" is "clean". But observation revealed there was another important dimension to the appearance of cleanliness: the way the floor feels when it is walked on.

This revelation came during an in-home interview where a man was seen cleaning his floor twice. While the first cleaning gave him a shiny floor, he sensed a sticking sensation when he walked on it that could be eliminated by a second application of the cleaner. It turns out that this performance cue is evaluated at a subconscious level and could only be discovered by observing the product actually being used.

Improving consumer experiences starts with finding those screwdrivers; the work-arounds consumers use, or the adaptations that consumers develop, to make your product work the way it is supposed to.

## **Want to find the “screwdrivers” in your business?**

Start by looking at how people interact with your products in places where interaction actually takes place. Try observing what the customer is doing and compare that to what the customer says. When there is a discrepancy between the two, you may have discovered information about how your product is being used that traditional research methods could never reveal. These differences may reveal subtle cues that can lead to new and better products.

Remain skeptical and weigh spoken opinions with a grain of salt. Consumers are often unaware of product flaws or fail to recognize them because work-arounds are most often done at a subconscious level.

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