

Using Immersion Techniques To Get Closer To The Customer

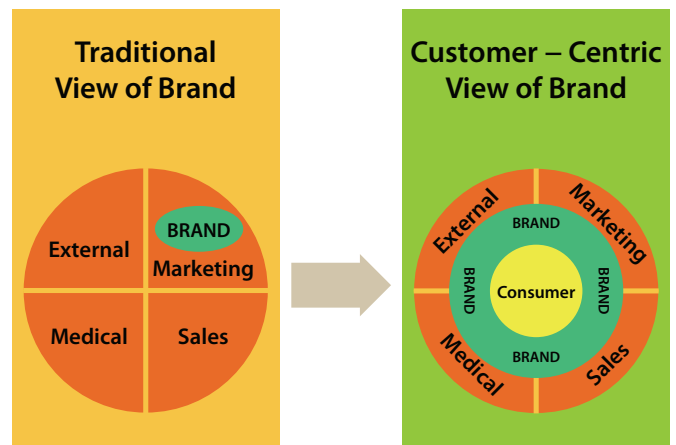
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Companies who want to be successful in the 21st century know that they cannot rely on the old adage that “a good product will sell itself”. To ensure sustainable growth, companies are increasingly focusing on their customer’s needs and organising their resources to be more customer-centric, which means putting the customer at the heart of the organisation.

This approach has been successfully implemented by many leading FMCG companies. However, adopting a customer-centric approach is not easy to accomplish. It requires a complete shift in corporate culture and structure—moving away from traditional departmental roles and silos, where sales are left to sales, product development is left to R&D, and the brand is owned by marketing, to one which makes the customer the focus of the entire company—its goals, strategies and activities.

The first step to achieving customer-centricity is to have a deep understanding of the customer and the best way to do that is via market research. The question is how can we use market research to achieve the customer-centricity that will improve satisfaction and loyalty amongst existing customers and attract new ones?



The pharma industry is developing a more customer-orientated focus with many companies developing sophisticated database systems and healthcare portals to track and understand behaviour and prescribing decisions.¹ But is this enough?

Information technology tools build a single view of the customer, which is seen by the entire organisation but they are limited because they do not offer real insight into the practical and emotional needs of the HCP stakeholder or the patient.

This is where market research is essential and the industry has developed many innovative approaches allowing immersion into the hearts and minds of the customer. So what techniques can be used to create a customer-centric offer?

Immersion in Market Research

As customer-centricity requires the organisation to put the customer at its heart, so market research must engage all stakeholders into each of the three stages of the research process.

1. Definition Defining project scope and methodology
2. Exploration Information gathering
3. Distillation Analysing/disseminating findings

At each stage, immersion techniques can be used in order to get closer to the customer.

1. Definition

During planning it's crucial to involve key stakeholders to both engage them and tap into the knowledge held within the organisation. In addition to stakeholder interviews, an insight audit, reviewing existing research, will provide a clear framework of the study aims and build on existing insights.

2. Exploration

In addition to primary research, secondary research can provide study context (e.g. what patients and competition are doing) adding value to the analysis of primary research. In terms of primary research, a number of different immersion methods can be utilised allowing a deep dive into the customer's thinking.

Ethnography

Ethnography has been useful in helping to make sense of the patients' and clinicians' worlds providing a picture of actual rather than reported behaviour. It has been used to explore patients' views on their experience of illness, understand the way health care is organised, and recognise how professional knowledge is used.² For example, an ethnographic approach was undertaken to examine women's knowledge and perceptions of the use of medication in pregnancy in

Malawi, and found several factors affecting compliance to intermittent preventive treatment (IPT).³ A similar study was conducted within patients' homes to challenged the notion that patients' non-compliance was due to dysfunction in the doctor-patient relationship.⁴ These studies revealed several key factors affecting compliance, which would not otherwise have been identified, allowing pharmaceutical companies to address improve patient adherence.

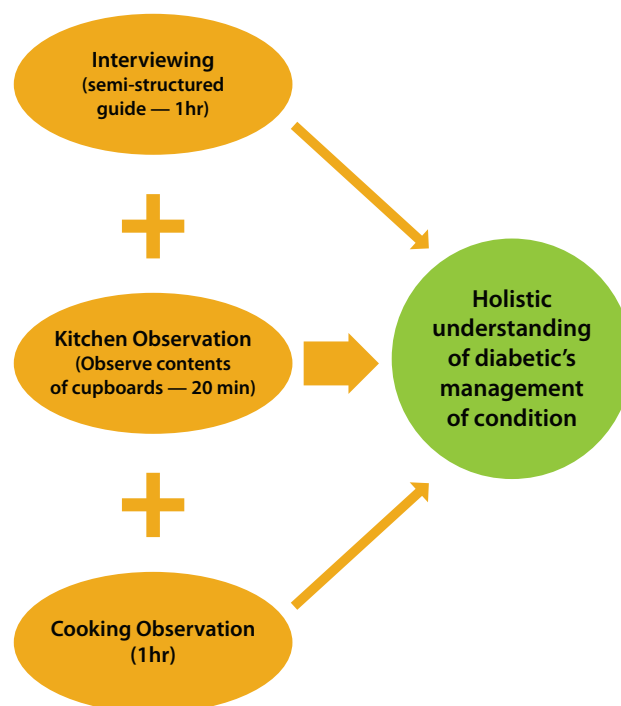
However, whilst pure ethnography is a powerful technique, it is also time-consuming, expensive and impractical. Nonetheless, the principles of ethnography can be applied to other immersion approaches allowing a better insight into customers (HCPs and patients) and their relationships.

Quick Guide to Ethnography

Other Immersion Techniques

There are many other immersion techniques which use the principles of ethnography to get closer to the customer. Techniques such as participant and non-participant observation, in-depth real-time interviews and new media techniques such as chat rooms can all be utilised allowing the researcher to look through customers' eyes.

Rather than relying on one single method of data collection, a mixture of immersion techniques can be used and adapted to construct a holistic understanding of the customer. For example, a combination of both observation and interviewing were used to help a major pharmaceutical company learn how diabetics manage the disease:



In this study, interviews were conducted over two and a half hours in the patient’s home, involving a mixture of interview and observation techniques. The highly experienced moderator watched the respondent prepare a family meal and observed the contents of their cupboards, whilst asking the patient questions about diet and lifestyle. The family was present and encouraged to chip in with comments that supported or refuted the respondent’s claims. The moderator found that what the respondent said about their diet was very different from what the family and cupboard contents revealed!

The findings helped the client learn more about their diabetic patients, the difficulties they faced, and how they can help patients better manage their condition. This allowed the client to focus on the patient’s (i.e. customer) needs and ultimately build a better relationship with patients positively impacting on duration of therapy.

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Another immersion methodology involved video diaries to investigate patients’ experiences of living with Restless Leg Syndrome. Video techniques can be very insightful and offer emotionally compelling outputs. They provide an unobtrusive access to the patient’s home, showing how they deal with the day-to-day challenges they face. These visual stimuli can be used during subsequent in-depth interviews, serving as key discussion points for patients and doctors.

Immersion Techniques	Examples
Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ In-house ✓ Clinic ✓ Online discussion forums ✓ Blogs
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ In-depth interview ✓ Casual conversations ✓ Questionnaires
Genealogical Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Video diaries ✓ Photography
Semiotics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Diagrams and symbols ✓ Artifacts

3. Distillation

Immersion sessions with internal stakeholders maximise the research analysis. These sessions are very successful for developing integrated and comprehensive interpretation of the findings. Individuals representing core departments across the organisation can share their views, offer their own interpretation and together develop more effective strategies. This process encourages greater engagement and commitment internally and through an improved

understanding of the customer, allows the company to be better placed to meet customer needs.

Summary

Being customer-centric is critical for a company to stay competitive, and requires the company to understand fully the needs of the customer so that a sustainable, healthy and mutually beneficial relationship between the two can be formed.

Key Stages	What It Encompasses	Immersion Techniques
Definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Planning ✓ Designing the research to address your business information needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Insight audits ✓ Interviews with stakeholders
Exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Research ✓ Primary and Secondary research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethnographic methods (e.g. observation, video diaries) ✓ Online research (e.g. blogs, forums)
Distillation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Analysis ✓ Interpreting the results, communicating the implications, recommending action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Immersion sessions ✓ Joint interpretation of findings

Market research is the cornerstone of customer-centricity and needs to be approached slightly differently. The key points to consider include:

- Involve stakeholders at the design stage
- Build in learnings already held within the organisation
- Include secondary research to provide broader context
- Utilise multiple data collection techniques (think beyond simple questionnaire)
- Empower the respondent to provide content, within defined framework
- Learn from ethnography and from consumer research
- Involve stakeholders at the distillation stage

Market research is ideally placed to help companies build customer understanding. And immersion techniques, applied at all stages of research from design to dissemination, can be especially useful in gaining customer insight. Immersion means involving key stakeholders in the process, obtaining their buy-in and their commitment to the company’s strategies and efforts to incorporate good CRM. ^

1. See Puschmann & Thalmann 2001; <http://is2.lse.ac.uk/asp/aspecis/20010093.pdf>
2. BMJ (2000) “Ethnographic studies can help make sense of patients’ and clinicians’ worlds”, *BMJ*, Vol. 321(December).
3. Launiala, A. and Honkasalo (2007) *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, Volume 101(10) pp. 980-989.
4. Shapiro, A. (2005) “Irrational Choices, Unfathomable Outcomes: Patient Ethnographies In Pharmaceutical Research”, *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings*, Vol. 2005(1), pp. 173-178.