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Companies spend a lot of time and money collecting, managing, analyzing, creating knowledge and applying data collected from customers, which is good news. Developing insight *about* customers helps *create* successful customers, necessary today because they’re increasingly looking for unique, high performing solutions to resolve their issues, problems, challenges and achieve their goals. If they don’t get the solutions they expect they are quick to search the myriad of competitors available and “switch.”

But the two major types of insight commonly developed aren’t enough to meet this customer powered, commoditization driven environment. Insight provided by “products and related services” initiated transactions that comes from sales calls, customer (or potential customer) inquiries, customers buying something or data acquired from other touch points (e.g. support) isn’t enough. Nor is the insight provided by vendors and customers collaborating on innovation and improvement projects (initiated either by the customer or the vendor), such as focus group interviews, questionnaires and data gathered from co-developing new products and related services.

As important as these insights are to business success, companies need *non-product* insight to develop the deep customer knowledge they need to make their entire organization the *total solution* customers demand.

To accomplish this goal, they need to gain *the* insight that uncovers opportunities and ideas – those that are glaringly obvious and overlooked up to those that are completely hidden – that can be turned into the innovative (or improved), complementary, customer focused benefit and activity assets – tangible and intangible ones related directly and indirectly to the business’ primary focus – that surround, augment and help define the unique quality of their products and related services so they deliver the intended performance and, more importantly, make it harder for the competition to duplicate their success.

Therefore, companies need insight that’s uncovered by getting answers to *open ended questions* that start *conversations* about what customers need to get the overall results they work for and the impact suppliers have on those results. This type of information has to be proactively and overtly asked for, using general to specific questions guided by customer objectives, risks, and constraints, and the impact the supplier’s skills, processes, tools, resources, deliverables, and time management has on the customer’s business. Categories like these lead to “insight turned into knowledge” that uncovers opportunities that help meet the goal of “turning the company into total solutions.”

The questions can’t be about the supplier’s products and related services – the focus of the questions have to be on the customer, not what the supplier “visibly” sells. The questions can’t assume that customers, one, know what they want, and, two, totally understand their own barriers to success. Also, in asking the questions, companies have to suspend the belief that customers buy from them because they have *the* solutions customers are looking for. Finally, the questions can’t assume that everyone in the company’s process chains see things the same way or have no opinions about how “up or down stream” benefits and activities impact customers.

The questions have to be framed so they achieve the following (implied from above) goals:

- Start conversations among the company’s team members, with customers or both.
- Identify what customers need - beyond products and related services - to achieve success and identify the impact company benefits and activities have on those results.
- Uncover opportunities to develop benefits and activities that enhance product innovations – per customer or per market.
- Build the customer’s business “context” that’s needed to create unique and customizable solutions.
- Make it hard for competitors to duplicate “total solutions” and, even though products might be subject to commoditization, find differentiating advantages so the business won’t be.

The questions that follow are examples of the type that will help achieve the goals stated above:

- Do we know the business strategies of our customers, those who develop the strategies, and, if different, those who are key to implementing the strategies?

Strategies are developed for the sole purpose of making the business different, or some aspect of it, so it can “beat” the competition or, more importantly, attract and/or keep customers. Customers develop theirs for the same reason. By understanding customer strategies, businesses can find opportunities to help customers build that difference – develop some new service or integrate service processes – or find something they can add to make the difference more effective – new product or process. Either way, the business itself becomes *different*.

By answering a related question (and its follow-ups)...

*Does our executive management team effectively communicate, to the entire company, and, if necessary other stakeholders, information concerning, for example, our strategies, business accomplishments, and market changes?*

...companies can identify the impact that sharing – or not – strategies and other information can have on the customer, therefore opening up opportunities for “complementary” benefits and activities that, for example, eliminate ambiguity and mitigate time issues.

- Do we understand how our customers plan and manage their projects from estimating through implementation?

By taking an interest in the customer’s project management activities, companies can find opportunities to better coordinate dependent activities, help customers improve their system, or build services that coordinate “fellow” suppliers’ projects with theirs and the customer’s.

There are many other questions that can be developed, like those that follow, which can be successful finding opportunities. As an exercise, think about the opportunities they can potentially uncover.

- Do we know the "core values" of our customers? That is, do we understand the principles by which they operate such as "excellent service", "highly reliable products", "environmental protection", "high financial returns", and "community service?"
- Do we have the tools to effectively support the information and technology requirements of our company's operating groups? How does having these tools impact – or not – our customer’s success?
- Do our customer touch point personnel have the needed skills to effectively collect competitive and market information? What’s the impact on our customer’s success?

Keep in mind, all seemingly profound questions asked won’t discover opportunities. But asking them is still important for alignment purposes, among company members and between the company and its customers.

There may be an argument that asking conversational questions takes time. Is it more time than it takes to recover from what competitors find first? Is it more time than it takes to win back or replace lost customers? Or is it more time to recover from a commoditized innovation? A structure of well facilitated, targeted questions will make the process effective. One developed opportunity will make the time worthwhile.

It’s important to ask these types of questions. While mining transactional data will help you predict your customer’s next move, finding and implementing opportunities from asking questions like these will allow you to make it for them!