



You DO Talk to Customers, Don't You?

One of the things I like about conducting testing within the customer experience framework is that the word "customer" appears in the name. The discipline of user experience has a similar benefit: users, the focus of the practice, are named right there in the title. These are in contrast to usability, whose name implies the usability of the *tool* being used, rather than the experience of the person using it. It may be a small observation, but "what's in a name" often reflects how methods are practiced.

One thing I *don't* like to see is practitioners of user experience, or customer experience, conducting their work without bothering to directly observe the people named in their discipline. For example, a user experience guru who never talks to users would seem to be a bit suspect, right? What about a customer experience practitioner who doesn't spend time with customers?

I occasionally come across reports written about the user experience of various sites - often ranking the sites, and making suggestions for improvement - without any observation of actual customers using the sites. Instead, the reports are based on any number of data which *can* be helpful in some instances but are no substitute for live observation. Click stream analysis, site statistics, persona assumptions at who is using the site and what they are doing are all data points that can be derived from analysis without contact with the user.

Again, none of these methods are "wrong"; I have used all of them at one time or another, in past projects. The problem arises when they are used without direct observation of customers. How can anyone presume to know the strategic issues in the *customer experience*, without listening to actual customers?

By definition, any customer experience project must involve real, live, actual customers. It's not adequate to operate solely from pre-defined rules, reams of quantitative data, or hypothetical (and fictional) stories of users. Customers themselves must be the focus of the research, and their experience on the site must be the basis of the resulting strategy.

Basing the project on actual customers has other benefits (beyond satisfying the basic definition of customer-centered work):

1. Setting priorities: Customers will tell you what's important to them, in what order. One of the problems with reports generated from heuristics, or hypothetical situations, is that they generate a "laundry list" of issues - not the five most important issues, but the 100 issues that all contribute (at whatever level) to the site's problems. It's much more valuable to know the prioritized short list of strategic problems to focus on.
2. Organizational politics: There is no organizational change method more powerful than sitting executives and key team members in front of real customers.
3. Significant business impact: Focusing an organization on strategic priorities, backed up by a supportive political environment, can make tremendous changes - quickly - that result in measurable business results.



No one is smart enough to craft a customer experience strategy without first directly observing customers. I recently ran listening labs with actual customers. I sat as an observer and listened to customers tell me exactly what they wanted from a new site under development. In that lab, the *customer* was my guru. I was only as good as my listening skills.

So - you ARE talking to customers, aren't you? If you aren't involving customers in your equation, I'd have to ask: What are you afraid of?