



## Broadcasting the Voice of the Customer

Braden Kelley – Founder, Business Strategy Innovation

"To create shareholder value, it all starts with creating products and services that are truly valuable to consumers, not merely useful."

"A potato peeler is useful, a Good Grips potato peeler is valuable. People will pay a premium for an insightful product or service."

"The relative skill and speed with which you extract insights from the voice of the customer, and adapt your organization to deliver the required insightful products and services, will determine whether you win or lose in tomorrow's marketplace."

Braden Kelley  
Business Strategy Innovation

### Related Quotes:

"To acquire knowledge, one must study; but to acquire wisdom, one must observe."

Observe the people. Observe yourself and your friends... We already know the game – the real question today is how we play it."

"I would strongly argue that this is what makes our business model and what we do so compelling and powerful. It's about observation – insight – linked to knowledge – we know and adapt and adapt again – but without observation all the knowledge in the world is nothing more than one dimensional information."

David Sable  
Vice Chairman and COO  
Wunderman Worldwide

Before the industrial revolution, most businesses in the United States were sole proprietorships or small family run businesses. In those days, every member of the business was in direct contact with the customers and had the opportunity to passively or actively hear the voice of the customer.

The voice of the customer tells us what about our product or service that customers find valuable, and what they find annoying or useless. By focusing on what customers found valuable and removing or reducing what they found annoying, these small businesses could accumulate financial success and customer loyalty.



In today's interconnected world, we are in the midst of a customer revolution. Today's customer has unparalleled access to pricing and product information to enable a more informed and economic purchasing decision. Today's customer benefits from marketing developments such as mass customization, mass

personalization, and micro-segmentation. In addition, they have unrivaled access to communication channels to make their preferences known. But, who is really listening?

We live in a world of corporations and conglomerates, where most of the employee class has no direct access to the voice of the customer. The man or woman stitching up your clothing has no idea whether the stitching method worked well for you, or if you were happy with the product. They only know whether or not they made their daily quota and how much failed Quality Control. If the person stitching your clothing had access to the voice of the customer, would they do their job differently? Would they feel differently about their job?

In many of today's companies, the job of listening to the customer falls to someone in the marketing department, possibly even someone who does nothing but focus on brand and customer research. This person usually works with product management and possibly research and development to inform product revisions and new product development. Often, very few people outside of that core team have access to the voice of the customer. But why restrict customer feedback to a select few?



"Today you can buy knowledge by the pound -- from consultants hawking best practice, from the staff you've just hired from your competitor, and from all those companies that hope you will outsource everything. Yet in the age of revolution it is not knowledge that produces new wealth, but insight -- insight into opportunities for discontinuous innovation. Discovery is the journey; insight is the destination. You must become your own seer."

Gary Hamel, Author  
Leading the Revolution

"We live in a society which is in the throes of a technological revolution... The changes we see each year are probably greater than those our predecessors encountered in a decade or perhaps even a working lifetime. When I started in this industry, a good ad, promotion pattern, or a media strategy could remain productive for years. They now pass into history almost as fast as the datelines on the magazines and papers we use."

Lester Wunderman (1967)  
Founder, Chairman Emeritus  
Wunderman Worldwide

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While it may be important to control access to the customer in order to avoid inappropriate contact, restricting access can stifle innovation and success. One way to control access is to implement a managed research panel<sup>1</sup>. In this scenario, the customer research people in the organization manage access to an opted-in sample of customers, allowing internal constituents from anywhere in the organization to "purchase" a percentage of a focus group. Therefore, no single group has to bear the cost or the burden of organizing a focus group, but instead can access customers to ask their specific queries as a portion of the focus group's overall session. In this way, groups as disparate as user documentation, branding, and warranty service can seek to understand and ultimately improve their contribution to the overall quality of the product or service. But will this by itself lead to innovation?



As the innovation velocity of an organization becomes a more crucial competitive differentiator in the global marketplace, it is mandatory that innovation becomes everyone's responsibility in the organization. In order for innovation to reliably happen at every level of the organization, it will be extremely useful for all members to have access to the voice of the customer. Making customer feedback available to all may include making focus group recordings and survey results available to all employees, or at least those who register an interest. Having access to the voice of the customer will enable all levels of the organization to submit more informed innovation project ideas and supporting justifications.

But will this only lead to better products and services?

Making the voice of the customer more widely available is not only likely to result in new product or service ideas, but is also likely to spur innovative ideas about how the organization can operate more efficiently. In addition, it has the potential to create a more customer-centric organization, to increase employee mobility within the organization, and to make it easier for disparate parts of the organization to communicate. So why aren't all companies already doing this?

Some companies may hesitate to share this information because of a perceived risk of leaking to competitors, but the incremental risk is minimal. Marketing people go to work for the competition all the time, and competitors have the same ability to research customer perceptions of your product as easily as their own. Organizations have so much to gain by granting access to the voice of the customer to all employees—and so little to lose. So what are you waiting for?



(1) Thank you to Josep Hernandez and Corey Gehrt of Wunderman New York for bringing this concept to my attention