Asking related questions of different stakeholder groups can provide actionable results

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COMPARING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL RESEARCH

Gap analysis between related questions on a single survey is a great way to see differences that need to be acted upon, says Angela Sinickas. Yet another type of gap analysis involves asking virtually identical questions of different stakeholder groups to uncover differences among their perceptions on the same issues.

One of my clients decided to conduct this type of two-pronged research because of the difficulty they experienced trying to get timely approvals for their customer magazine from the sales representatives responsible for customers mentioned in the magazine. The communicators heard anecdotally that this was because the sales reps didn't believe customers valued the magazine.

The communication group's frustration led them to commission a survey conducted in five languages through one-on-one interviews with senior-executive customers at companies around the world who have power over purchasing decisions. Since every signed contract represents millions of dollars, the potential ROI of communication that might influence the executives' decisions was great.

The customer survey looked at the value of a number of customer communications, illustrated in Figure One. Some of the questions we asked about each type of communication channel were about the amount of influence it had in various stages of the sales process, from requesting a sales consultation to signing a contract. The numbers on the vertical axis show the averaged percentages of the different types of influence identified by customers who'd experienced each type of communication.

Mirroring customer/employee questions
At the same time, my client wanted to better understand how the sales reps perceived these customer communications and how – or if – they used them to support their customer meetings. The questions we asked sales reps about the probable influence of each channel were nearly identical with the "influence" questions asked of customers. Sales reps' averaged percentages appear on the horizontal axis in Figure One.

The diagonal line in the diagram shows where a communication channel would be charted if customers and sales reps valued that channel to the same extent. The real opportunity for my client was to make changes related to channels that were far off the diagonal, where sales reps either over-estimated or under-estimated a channel's value to customers.

Corrective actions taken
Social events (to the right of the diagonal) were less influential than sales reps thought they were.

Results that the communication group found most actionable, however, were the channels in the circled area – channels customers said influenced sales to a much greater extent than sales reps anticipated.

Although these materials were all developed by the communicators, sales reps controlled distribution of several channels, including the customer magazine. Not surprisingly, many of these highly rated channels were unfamiliar to many customers.

Based on these findings and additional questions asked of the sales reps, some of the changes senior management approved included:

- Having some of these materials, like the client magazine, sent directly to all clients and prospects.
- Recommending where in the sales process reps might best use different materials based on the stages of the selling process customers said a channel most influenced.
- Making changes in the content and format of some channels based on customer feedback.

Single survey questions provide good information, but contrasting results of two questions is like watching a movie in color instead of in black and white. Going a step further to compare employee and customer research on the same issues is like watching a movie in 3-D.

Figure One: Comparing clients' vs sales representatives' perceptions of how information sources influence sales

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