What Do Customers Really Care About? A Focusing Lens for Innovation

Well, that is the billion-dollar question, isn't it?

This question can be analyzed in terms of many different facets of the customer experience, such as features, store offerings, package design, ad impact, etc. Moreover, we as marketers can explore the question in myriad ways, through: functional benefits, emotional benefits, social acceptance, ego gratification, and so on. We can use many different methodologies to get "there" such as hierarchies of needs, ego fulfillment theories, personality traits, self-image motivators, etc.

Often though, marketers do research project after project without fully answering this question, despite the fact that getting the right answer is critical to success.

Research often starts by simply directly asking customers the question, "What do you care about?" Unfortunately, many people also stop here, which invites major risk. How do you know if customers are telling you what they truly believe, or just what they think you want to hear? Do they even know what they care about? Are they even able to communicate what it is they truly want, or offer you any insight into an experience that doesn't yet exist? As Henry Ford once quipped, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses."

Finding an answer to what customers really want requires multiple approaches and the ability to triangulate data and insights. Simply taking customer comments at face value will ultimately lead to less than optimal or even patently false answers. In our efforts to achieve a deeper understanding of our customers, we engage in focus groups, advisory forums, online communities, and a handful of other practices. When working in the area of innovation, however, the ultimate responsibility for creating the "next big thing" falls on the company—not on the customer. And that means we need the proper knowledge base to draw from when making critical decisions.

Imagine that we had undertaken research on what customers wanted in their experience with, say, a bookstore. Specifically, suppose the research focused on the following customer scenario:

George is going on a trip and would like to buy a book to read on the plane. He visits the local bookstore and browses through the shelves of books arranged by various subjects. He's not really sure what he's in the mood to read, so he browses for a while and finally settles on science fiction. He looks over the many book titles but is still not certain of what to buy. He wonders if there is a salesperson who might help him, but no one seems to be around. He wanders around the store, eventually finds someone near the registers, and asks for a recommendation on a good science fiction book. The store clerk does not appear to know. Another customer overhears George's question and recommends the book Enders Game. (She thought it was one of the best contemporary sci-fi books available.) George heads back to the science fiction section and can't seem to locate the book. He asks the employee at the information desk if she has the book in stock, and she says, "No, but I can order it." "Well, when could I get it?" he asks. "Three days," she says. That wouldn't work; his trip is in just two days. George is out of luck.

What did George really want? What were his needs? On one level, a marketer might argue that his needs were: a bookstore near his home, helpful sales associates, and a greater selection of books. If the marketer put down anchor at this level of customer needs, the solution for the book store owner might be to open more stores, with more, better-trained sales people, and more books in stock. Answers, yes, but not exactly the right answers.
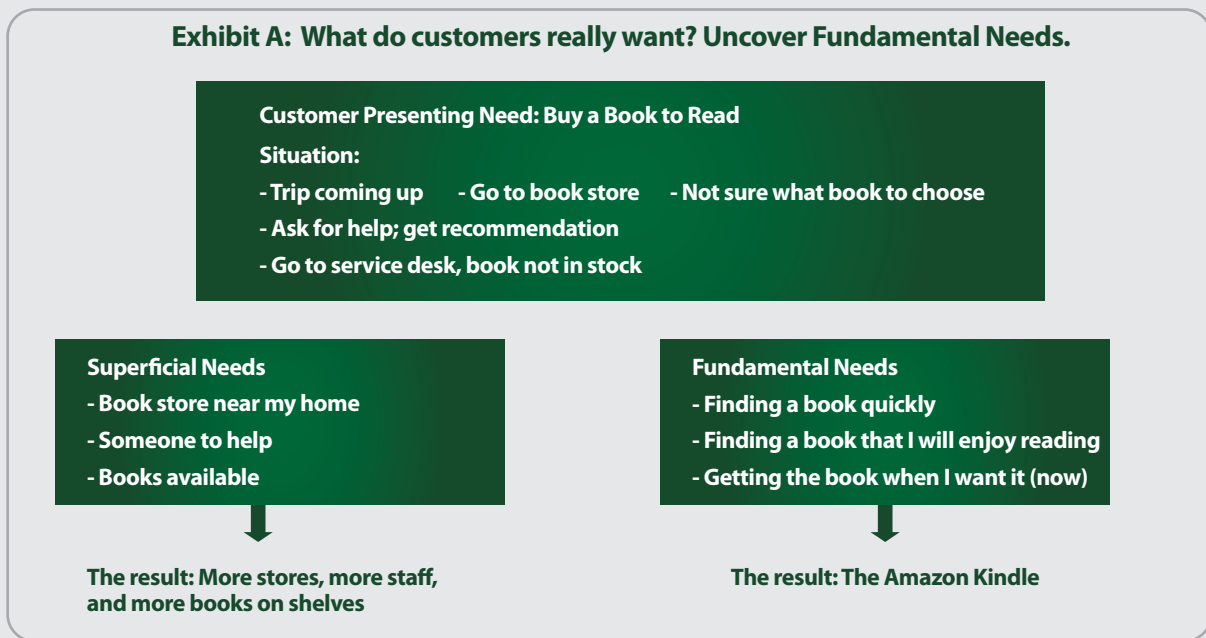
There's a much more compelling perspective of George's situation and what he really cares about - **a perspective that pushes beyond the immediate or surface needs, and asks probing questions to uncover the outcomes customers would ultimately like to reach. It brings about an understanding of what we call "fundamental needs."**

This perspective would show that the customer's fundamental needs can be reformulated as: finding a book quickly (rather than a book store near his home), finding a book he will enjoy reading (rather than someone to help), and getting a book when he wants it (rather than more books in stock). Viewed this way, the "bookstore owner" might then innovate a very different solution, like the Amazon.com Kindle. With Kindle, George can go to the Amazon.com website, find recommendations for what he might enjoy, and download the book instantly—and all in plenty of time for his trip!

What could be better than that? Kindle isn't just more innovative than the "more bookstores" approach. It's innovation that has the potential to drive marketplace sea change because it eliminates the need for any bookstores—for people who find themselves in similar situations to George.

Exhibit A summarizes these differing approaches to answering the question of "What do customers really want?"

Exhibit A: What do customers really want? Uncover Fundamental Needs.

Customer Presenting Need: Buy a Book to Read

Situation:
- Trip coming up   - Go to book store   - Not sure what book to choose
- Ask for help; get recommendation
- Go to service desk, book not in stock

Superficial Needs
- Book store near my home
- Someone to help
- Books available

↓

The result: More stores, more staff, and more books on shelves

Fundamental Needs
- Finding a book quickly
- Finding a book that I will enjoy reading
- Getting the book when I want it (now)

↓

The result: The Amazon Kindle

In this example, the illustrated "Fundamental Needs" are possible outcomes the customer wanted to obtain: Finding a book quickly that he would enjoy reading and getting it when he wanted it.
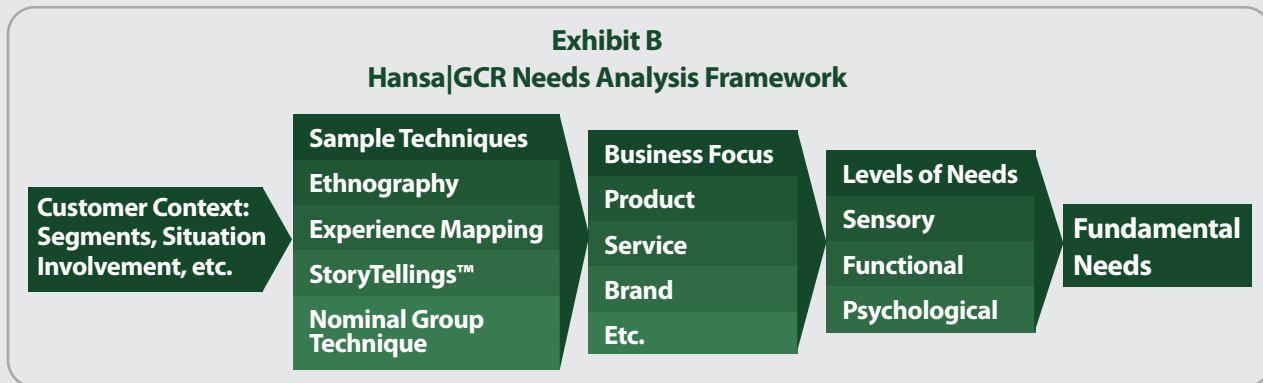
The Importance of The Customer Context

Customer needs may fall into different types or levels: sensory, functional, or psychological. Jane, who loves the look and feel of a physical bookstore, illustrates one level of these sensory needs; Jane would be unhappy with a Kindle. George, seeking a book for his trip, likely exemplifies more functional needs. Yet another customer, Bob, might be motivated by greater psychological needs, like gaining the esteem of friends for having read the latest bestseller. In fact, all customers will have needs in all of these levels: understanding how to categorize, prioritize, and communicate those needs must be the guiding purpose for any innovation research.

The task of uncovering fundamental needs involves the right questioning strategies, the right techniques to gain clarity on outcomes, and a thorough understanding of both the customer context and the provider's business purpose.

For example, if we were marketing a series of romance novels, we might tap into a consumer's psychological desire to "live" her secret dreams, rather than appeal to functional or sensory needs. Alternatively, if we were interested in designing a kiosk to help bookstore patrons find the right book, we would ask a few questions about type of book or subject the customer is seeking. In this case, the perspective would be more functional.

Your business purpose needs to serve as the focusing lens of your efforts.

Exhibit B
Hansa|GCR Needs Analysis Framework

Customer Context: Segments, Situation Involvement, etc.

Sample Techniques
Ethnography
Experience Mapping
StoryTellings™
Nominal Group Technique

Business Focus
Product
Service
Brand
Etc.

Levels of Needs
Sensory
Functional
Psychological

Fundamental Needs

It is critical to have the proper perspective and use the right tools to uncover what our customers and prospective customers really want. At Hansa|GCR, we have developed techniques to uncover these fundamental customer needs at deep subconscious and emotional levels, and we have a unique framework for understanding the role of context and business purpose.

A Final Word

Regardless of who your customer is, always ask the following questions:

- Am I looking to enhance an existing product or service experience, or innovate something that currently does not exist?

- Do I understand what my customers are really saying?

- Have I uncovered the fundamental needs customers are looking to satisfy?

- Have I considered the role of the customer's context in shaping those needs?

- Have I uncovered the needs at all three levels: sensory, functional, and psychological?

- Have I focused the needs based on my established business purpose?

Happy hunting!!

Hansa provides a full range of qualitative and quantitative research services. Our experienced research and consulting team, including PhD-level statisticians, uses innovative, data-driven methodologies tailored to our clients' research needs.

We pride ourselves on our ability to truly understand the voice of the customer and translate that voice into winning strategies for brand development, marketing communications, customer relationship enhancement, and product/service innovation.