

Imagine you lived in the golden days of radio...

Here's a little mental exercise for you... Imagine you are living in the early 1930's. One of the most significant items in your living room is a radio. In fact, it's the focus of the family's attention on most evenings. In addition to music and news there are many comedy and drama series such as "Fibber McGee and Molly", "The Life of Reilly", and "The Shadow". More likely than not, your radio is an attractive and rather imposing device prominently located in the living room both for convenience and so visitors can see and appreciate it. The radio band, of course, is only AM. Reception and sound quality are poor and stations are limited.



Now imagine a representative of RCA, the Radio Corporation of America, comes to your town and invites you and your neighbors to a meeting at the local community center. Once everyone has gathered, the leader explains that the company is vitally interested in developing the next generation product. This will be a brainstorming session to collect the "voice of the customer" to assure that the new product will meet your "unmet needs." Normal brainstorming rules apply; no idea is a bad one, no criticism allowed, etc. What results might be expected?

I've actually tried this exercise on some of my university classes and, even though my students are living in the 21st century, their responses were almost universally those that might have been expected 80 years ago...

- Better reception
- Better sound quality
- More stations
- Easier tuning
- More attractive cabinet design
- Different wood species
- Etc., etc. etc.

Only once did any of my students say they wanted a picture on the front so they could see what was happening! And, of course, unlike our fictitious panel of yesterday, my students knew about television!

My message is this... If your idea of collecting "voice of the customer" is asking folks what they want, it's highly unlikely that you'll get anything more than incremental improvements to what already exists. Granted, those improvements may be necessary to keep your current offering viable in the face of competition but more is needed to propel your company to the next level.

In their absence, who among us would have suggested the development of the television, the home computer, the cell phone, the DVR or any of the other ubiquitous products around which our lives revolve?

In order to develop truly innovative, commercially successful products, you must interpret the term "Voice of the Customer" more broadly. It must be aimed at learning about the customer's life. What is important to her? How does she use the types of products that you sell? What frustrations does he have with the product? How has he modified the product to better serve his purposes? The list goes on but hopefully you grasp the idea; if you understand the customer, you can often discover a "need" that she did not even know she had! When you fill that need, both you and your customers will benefit.

About J. H. Welsch Consulting, L.L.C.

Jack Welsch has had over 4 decades of experience in engineering and new product development at all levels and has been awarded over 35 U.S. patents. He has been directly involved with the phased and gated development process since 1979 and has spent much of his time and energy in the continuous improvement of the process. While most of his career has been spent in manufacturing companies, he has taught the business aspects of product development as an adjunct instructor, at both Lehigh and Wilkes Universities. In addition to his roles as Principal of J. H. Welsch Consulting, L.L.C., he is Chairman of Wilkes' Industrial Advisory Board.

J. H. Welsch Consulting, L.L.C. is dedicated to helping firms improve their new product development process. Learn more at www.jhwelsch.com/npd.