Virtual Voice of the Customer:

The ideas highlighted in this article grew out of AIM’s experience with travel restrictions during the 2008-2009 recession. AIM has further refined and taught these methods in dozens of webcasts and training webinars since the onset of this pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Your new-product team understands it must interview customers to uncover and prioritize their needs. But what if health or budget concerns have severely limited your travel? Can you truly accomplish this remotely using a web conference? You can. In fact, there are hidden advantages to virtual VOC you may not have considered. We will examine 10 such advantages and offer seven suggestions for great virtual VOC.

A common question is, “Which is better: an in-person customer interview or one conducted by web conference?” If you’re comparing a two-hour, in-person interview to a two-hour web conference, the answer is easy: In-person interviews are the gold standard. You’ll make a stronger personal connection, observe body language, and perhaps take a tour afterward.

But what if you spent 10 hours of travel for the in-person interview and no travel time for the virtual interview? It’s time to move beyond simplistic either-or comparisons of in-person vs. virtual VOC. They each have their attractions and limitations. The clever new-product development team understands what these are and skillfully deploys a mix of the two. Let’s begin with some fundamentals.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF VIRTUAL VOC

“Voice of customer” means different things to different people. The focus here is gaining market insights for B2B innovation through qualitative and quantitative interviews. You’ll probably use a moderator, note-taker, and (post) observer to listen to a group of customer contacts, usually from the same company.

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Top-performing suppliers of coatings and their ingredients understand the value of B2B-optimized customer interviews. Nothing improves new-product innovation more than working on the right customer problems. But what do you do when a pandemic limits travel? You innovate, using virtual voice-of-customer (VOC) meetings so effective they'll become a fixture in front-end innovation long after the pandemic.

The AIM Institute grows, connects, and inspires the technology tans community through education and career development. Since 2005 it has taught thousands of B2B professionals how to better understand customer needs. This in turn leads to improved innovation, stronger business growth, and ultimately, stable and rewarding careers for these professionals.

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Your new-product team understands it must interview customers to uncover and prioritize their needs. But what if health or budget concerns have severely limited your travel? Can you truly accomplish this remotely using a web conference? You can. In fact, there are hidden advantages to virtual VOC, you may not have considered. We will examine 10 such advantages and offer seven suggestions for great virtual VOC.

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But what if you spent 10 hours of travel for the in-person interview and no travel time for the virtual interview? It's time to move beyond simplistic either/or comparisons of in-person vs. virtual VOC. They each have their attractions and limitations. The clever new-product development team understands what these are and skillfully deploys a mix of the two.

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Try to deletion immediately after your interview.

Customers sit in there. Or just your sales representative could meet in person with the rest of your team stays at your office. All participants could join the interview from their home offices.

All parties connect through a web-conference service, such as Zoom, Skype, or WebEx, and just use a phone conference call for that? It's critical that your customers can watch as you talk on screen.

Why? They'll be able to correct any questions you ask in real-time. They'll be able to build off each other's ideas. Most important, this is the key to keeping their attention during the interview. Don't underestimate how much visual feedback engages customers.

New Product Blueprinting

Practitioners provide this feedback by displaying sticky notes and slider rating bars for discovery and preference interviews, respectively (see illustration on page 24). The interview team records customers' needs on the sticky notes, much as you'd record ideas in a brainstorming session. The preference slider bars let the team record how important and satisfied customers are with the most popular needs on a 1-to-10 scale.

Discovery interviews are qualitative and divergent: "What other outcomes are important to you?" You start by asking the customer—usually with several job functions represented—what problems they have. You'll record a customer "out

come" (desired end results) on a sticky note and then analyze the data to better understand the outcome. Then you simply ask, "What other problems are you trying to solve?" to elicit the next outcome in the sticky note.

If you produced corrupted packaging, you might hear these outcomes in your interview with Amazon:

- Minimize the time it takes to seal a box when inserting merchandise
- Minimize box damage from outdoor moisture
- Maximize the stacking strength of baled cardboard

Note that you're not looking for solutions—that's your job as the supplier—just outcomes customers are interested in.

Preference interviews are quantitative and convergent: "What are your most important needs?" You'll review several of the more popular outcomes you heard during discovery interviews. For each, you'll ask two questions:

1) How important is this outcome?
2) How satisfied are you with this outcome today?

Use these answers to identify outcomes that are both important and unsatisfied. These are the only outcomes customers might pay you a premium for.

In our discovery interview example for packaging, we didn't differentiate how eager customers were for each outcome. That's why preference interviews are needed, and why heightening the height of virtual VOC is too important an Amazon. And they might already be reasonably satisfied with moisture resistance. But box-sealing time could be very important and unsatisfied today. So this is the only outcome they might pay more for.

The vast majority of B2B suppliers skip this quantitative interview step, and so allow guesswork, bias, and filtering into their product designs. For more on this, download the white paper, Guesting at Customer Needs, available at www.guestingatcustomerneed.com.

So why conduct both qualitative discovery and quantitative preference interview? Discovery interviews help your team avoid errors of omission: failing to uncover unarticulated customer outcomes. Preference interviews help you avoid errors of commission: choosing the wrong customer-outcomes to work on. Preference interviews are particularly powerful because they lead to the calculation of market satisfaction gaps, and these tell you exactly what customers do and don't want. More guessing, bias, or filtering. The calculation and analysis is shown in the panel below, with more information in a white paper at www.marketassessments.com.

Calculating Market Satisfaction Gaps from Preference Interviews

1. Data-driven Discovery Interviews for the outcomes customers seem most eager to improve.

2. Ask customers for 1-10 ratings on importance (IMP) and satisfaction (SAT) during Preference Interviews.

3. Be sure to anchor your 1-10 ratings. (Example: A satisfaction score of 5 is "barely acceptable")

4. Calculate Market Satisfaction Gaps for key outcomes. (See formula to the right.)

5. With VOC, you've calculated high market opportunities. Higher scores indicate even more desire for change.

With virtual VOC, geography no longer matters. This is important for qualitative interviews, but you should interview multiple customer contacts simultaneously. This lets customers have the same line-of-sight to the same ideas. Just like brainstorming.

For quantitative preference interviews, it's even more critical. One of the most powerful ways you can influence end-users and increase sales resistance is to get the market manager on board, if you gathered results individually, you'd have to average their responses at 0.6...a terrible idea. But in a virtual session with all present, you can let them debate. You eventually resolve department-specific viewpoints with a simple question: "From the perspective of your entire company, how important is abrasion resistance?"

Advantage 3: Verifiable Probing Tips: The key to great VOC is great probing. One such approach is the "What and Why" approach of probing. The moderator asks questions, such as "What?" which is "When does this happen?" and "Can you describe this?"

As you ask the questions, discolo

Advantage: Dispersed Customer Contacts: What if your customer's R&D staff is in Houston and its marketing staff is in Chicago? If so, or if some of your customer contacts are working from home and your team is as well

Advantage 4: Training for Colleagues.

So why do we consider this an advantage of virtual VOC? You can set these preferences on the "show" during the interview and keep referring to them. You can also do this with in-person interviews, of course, but it's much smoother in a web conference because customers don't see you checking your notes.

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customers sit in theirs. Or just your sales representative might meet in person with other customers while the rest of your team stays at your office. Or all participants could join the interview from their home offices.

All parties connect through a web-conference service, such as Zoom, Skype, or Google Hangouts. Don’t just use a phone conference call for that. It’s critical that your customers can see each other during the interview.

Why? They’ll be able to correct what you’re saying, and they’ll be able to build off each other’s ideas. Most important, this is the key to holding their interest during the interview. Don’t understate how much visual feedback engages customers.

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Practitioners provide this feedback by displaying sticky notes and slider rating bars for discovery and preference interviews, respectively (see illustration on page 24). The interview team records customers’ needs on the sticky notes, much as you’d record ideas in a brainstorming session. The preference slider bars let the team record how important and satisfied customers are with the most popular needs on a 1-to-10 scale. Hence, the preference interview is qualitative and divergent.

“What other outcomes are important?” The team might start adding the customer—usually with several job functions represented—what problems they have. You’ll record a customer “outcome” (desired end results) on a sticky note and then have the customer better understand the outcome. Then you simply ask, “What other problems are you facing?” to reveal the outcome in the next sticky note.

If you produced corrupted packaging, you might hear these outcomes in your interview with Amazon:

- Minimize the time it takes to seal a box when inserting merchandise
- Minimize box damage from outdoor moisture
- Maximize the stacking strength of buildings during disasters

Note that you’re not looking for solutions—that’s your job as the supplier—just outcomes customers are interested in.

Preference interviews are quantitative and convergent. “What are your most important needs?” “What do you like best?” You’ll review several of the more popular outcomes you heard during discovery interviews. For each, you’ll ask two questions:

1. How important is this outcome?
2. How satisfied are you with this outcome today?

That’s how you determine which of the different outcomes are both important and unsatisfied. These are the only ones customers might pay you a premium for improving.

In our discovery interview example for packaging, we didn’t differentiate how eager customers were for each outcome. That’s why preference interviews are needed, and that’s why high-quality virtual VOC is so important. We’ve also discovered some “hidden” advantages that didn’t show up in our traditional VOC survey.

Let’s explore both these obvious and little-known advantages.

**Advantage 1: Lower cost.** You’ll start with the most obvious advantage. Imagine you need two or three interviews out of 6 to 10 quantitative interviews. You could spend $50,000 on travel expenses. If you are conducting your interviews globally, you can expect to pay even more.

Most companies pay close attention to the out-of-pocket travel expenses. Perhaps more concerning is the amount of personnel time you’veprobably committed two to three six-months of employee time, with at least 80% of it completely wasted in rental cars, security and hotel rooms, and cramped airplane seats. These travel expenses and non-productive personnel time disappear with virtual VOC.

**Advantage 2: Dispersed Customer Contacts.** What if your customer’s R&D staff is in Chicago and its marketing staff is in Los Angeles? Picture your customer contacts are working from home and your team is as well.

With virtual VOC, geography no longer matters. This is important for qualitative discussion groups because you should interview multiple customer contacts simultaneously. This lets customers share their unique perspectives as well as different ideas. Just like brainstorming.

When you approach probing questions is highly effective. You can even have a list of pre-screened questions that get crossed off the white board one-by-one. Whenever it seems relevant, you can stop and go back to ask them. This is far better than going through a boring questionnaire. And it works particularly well in virtual VOC.

**Advantage 3: Visibility.** We’ve noticed something peculiar in-person interviewing: Customers sometimes forget about the poor note-taker.

Because you’re engaged in the discussion, they may fail to notice the note-taker sitting in the back. These dynamics change with virtual VOC. Since the only thing you can watch is on the web-conference screen, they quickly notice any laggard note-taker. We find customers are more helpful in slowing their pace, repeating points, and suggesting other solutions. Sometimes even leave some members back at the home office while others track the discussion. One of the benefits of this, we suggest you let the note-taker stay home.

**Advantage 4: Rapid Debriefing.** In non-pandemic times, the team would complete its in-person interview, and go to a nearby coffee shop or vietnamese noodle place. Picture the team gathered at Starbucks with the observer recommending changes. But now with VOC, the debriefing can begin immediately after the interview. No hunting for a place to speak openly, setting up the laptop again, worrying about catching flight, etc. This is important because the Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve means we forget half of what we’ve learned in the first 24 hours.

**Advantage 5: Easier Scheduling.** Sometimes the hardest part of B2B VOC is scheduling the interview. The issue usually boils down to availability and reluctance, and virtual VOC helps with both. The availability of your team can be a big draw card if you need the same apen day travel that the customer is available. But it’s easier finding a time when you can make a one-to-two-hour virtual interview.
Virtual Voice of the Customer

Tips for Scheduling Interviews

Do these advantages inspire you to include virtual VOCS interviews as part of your customer interview strategy? Before you begin scheduling your conference calls, be aware we have some good-hung interviews.

Tip 1: Choose Wisely

We've seen problems when the interviewee was available all day or for all five days. To determine the best approach for your project:

- **Team experience.** Virtual VOCS is easier if your team has already mastered the dynamics of in-person interviews.
- **Customer relationship.** Virtual VOCS works especially well when you already have a relationship with a friendly customer.
- **No need for a tour.** Consider virtual VOCS if your team has already established a relationship with a familiar customer.
- **Sales colleagues:** Set up a web-conference interview and ask them to “represent the customer.” Besides great practice, you'll get your sales team comfortable with these interviews, so they'll be more effective in requesting them.
- **Industry experts:** If you have others in your company with experience in this area, perhaps based on prior interactions or another company? These could be helpful interview candidates.
- **Distraction:** If you use distributors and agents, interview them before the “real” customers that use your product. It will be good practice for you, and you'll understand how much market insight they have, and turn your distributors into valuable interview team members.
- **Smaller, safer customers.** If you have smaller customers, start your interviews with them. Also, consider interviewing “friendly” customers who will overlook your “smoothness” until you get comfortable with this type of interviewing.
- **Large, high-stakes customers.** By the time you “buy” the interview, you've worked with all interviewers and have high-quality notes. You and your team will be more polished, which impresses the interviewee.

Tip 2: Build Your Team's Skills

Practice interviewing a team in a graduated, stepwise fashion. When you do this, your interview team—which should include marketing, technical, and sales—will develop skills that truly impress customers. Begin with safe audiences, such as industry experts you pay to interview, then your own social professionals, and so on.

- **Industry Experts:** If you pay to interview a GLG, Alphasights, or similar industry expert, use this time to improve your skills. Your phones are the only tool at your disposal. You speak and market your specific questions. Then, for the rest of your time, ask the expert to respond as he or she believes customers would.
- **Sales colleagues.** Set up a web-conference interview and ask them to “represent the customer.” Besides great practice, you'll get your sales team comfortable with these interviews, so they'll be more effective in requesting them.

Tip 3: Prepare Your Customers

If you're looking for great virtual VOCS, you'll need to carefully prepare your interviewees:

- **Work hard to get several customer contacts joining each interview, but not just one.** You'll get more valuable information this way and raise the overall energy level.
- **Make sure all customer attendees—not just your main contact—receive a copy of the good probing questions on a whiteboard, as suggested earlier.**
- **Don't call it an “interview.”** As long as you can have a bad conversation. Instead, call it a customer meeting or “session.”
- **Provide customers with the WIFM: “What's in it for me?”** Tell customers you could be using their sources of openness, external innovation. You've already vetted with industry experts. You're eager to learn more. You expect no upfront payment. They call it “customer development.” They're not asking for anything. They're not asking for anything.
Advantage 9: Low-impact Cancellations.
Face it, you'll have some canceled customer interviews, for any number of reasons:
- Your main contact customer got sick.
- Their company just had a business emergency.
- Their boss called an all-hands meeting.
- Their conference room was taken over by a VIP.
- Your contact made a calendar mistake or simply forgot.
With virtual VOC, you don't need to limp back to the airport empty-handed at the end of a wasted day. You simply reschedule.

Advantage 10: Greater Project Speed.
We saved our favorite for last. If your new project eventually has annual sales of $5 million with average profits, you can guess the net present value (NPV) of accelerating the launch by one month? About $80,000. You create $4,000 of value for every business day you accelerate your project.

Virtual VOC lets you move faster with more productive scheduling and the ability to schedule two or possibly more interviews per day. Converting many of your in-person interviews to virtual VOC can easily trim a month or two off your timeline.

One more suggestion: As you finish up each discovery interview, ask the customer for a good date and time for the preference interview. Get it on the calendar right now, and you'll accelerate your timeline and save the hassle of setting up preference interviews later. Use this tip with both in-person and virtual VOC to rapidly complete your interviews.

Tip 1: Choose Wisely.
We've seen problems where the views were done at (a) all in-person, (b) all virtually, and (c) a mix of the two. Consider the following points when choosing the best approach for your project:
- Team experience. Virtual VOC is easier if your team has already mastered the dynamics of in-person interviews.
- Customer experience. Virtual VOC works especially well when you've already established a relationship with a friendly customer.
- Need for a tour. Consider virtual VOC after you've completed enough customer tours with earlier in-person interview sessions.
- Interview type. Virtual VOC works well for both discovery and preference interviews, but it is especially productive for the latter.
- Scheduling. If you're having a hard time coordinating calendars, consider scheduling a virtual interview.
- Travel costs. Virtual VOC eliminates your travel, which is especially helpful in difficult economic times or when international interviews are needed.
- Interviewing progress. Many teams conduct their initial interviews in-person, and then move to virtual VOC. The latter is most helpful for preference interviews when you want more 0 to 100 outcome ratings to boost your statistical confidence.

Tip 2: Build Your Team's Skills.
Practice interviewing as a team in a graduated, stepwise fashion. When you do this, your interview team—which should include marketing, technical, and sales—will develop skills that truly impress customers. Begin with safe audiences, such as industry experts you pay to interview, then your own sales professionals, and so on.

Industry Experts: If you pay to interview a GLG, Alphasights, or similar industry expert, use this time to improve your skills. Focus on the phone-only approach and conduct a weak-to-strong interview. Ask your market-specific questions. Then for the rest of your time, ask the expert to respond as he or she believes customers would.

Sales colleagues: Set up a web-conference interview and ask them to reply as "the customer would." Besides great practice, you'll get your sales team comfortable with these interviews, so they'll be more effective in requesting them.

Internal departments: Do you have others in your company with experience in this area, perhaps based on their purchasing experience? These could be helpful interview candidates.

Distantly. If you use distributors, interview them before the "real" customers that use your product. It will be good practice for you, but you'll also understand how much market insight they have, and turn your distributors into your most valuable interview teams.

Smaller, safer customers. If you have smaller customers, start your interviews with them. Also, consider interviewing "friendly" customers who will overlook your lack of "smoothness" until you get comfortable with this type of interviewing.

Large, high-stakes customers: By the time you "buy into" these customers with prior practice, you and your teammates will be highly polished, impressive interviewing teams!

Tip 3: Prepare Your Customers.
If you're looking for great virtual VOC, you'll need to carefully prepare your interviewees:
- Work hard to get several customer contacts joining each interview, not just one. You'll get more valuable information this way and raise the overall energy level.
- Make sure all customer attendees—not just your main contact—receive a copy of these good probing questions on a whiteboard, as suggested earlier.

Tip 4: Make This Enjoyable for Customers.
With a little effort, your virtual VOC will engage and energize your customers. Here’s how:
- Use your webcams so they can see your smiling faces, especially at the beginning of the session. At a minimum, display photos of yourselves.
- At the onset, go around the room with introductions. Start with your team members and keep it light and friendly.
- You might order some food to be delivered to them from a local restaurant, such as Panera. (Check with your main contact first.)
- Use lots of visual cues during the meeting. If you're using discovery sticky notes, stick to the sticky note number so all can follow along. Or if you want to draw their attention to some text, be sure to highlight it.

Tip 5: Trade Like a Pro.
Getting the right customer contacts into your interview is the most important part of VOC success. After that, top-flight probing separates great VOC from mediocre VOC. Go for “great” with these tips:
- Put probing tips in front of you during virtual VOC. As discussed earlier, you can keep referring to your “what and why” probing questions throughout the interview.
- Make sure all customer attendees—not just your main contact—receive a copy of these good probing questions on a whiteboard, as suggested earlier.
- Invite VOC “trainees” into your virtual VOC for firsthand experience. By the time they start conducting their own interviews, they'll be well past the novice stage.

Tip 6: Consider Sending a Local Colleague.
Do you have a sales rep or customer, in your geographic area, physically close to physically represent your company? They can be helpful in several ways:
- Have your sales professional arrive early and help with meeting setup. Then everything is ready to go when the first customer arrives.
- Ask your main contact to join the meeting 10-15 minutes early in your conference room, so you can get the web interface working and do a sound check.

- It's a great icebreaker if your colleague is in the customer conference room for greetings and introductions.
- Your local person can be your primary interview "observer." They should watch body language, monitor signs of impatience, notify if one person isn't getting a chance to speak, etc.

Aim for a virtual VOC that fits your budget, but never compromises on the quality of the data you're collecting. (See our pre-written proposal for more on virtual VOC.)