



Tips for Researching Customer Needs

- 1. Poll customer opinions using Web, mail, e-mail, or phone surveys.** You might ask what your customers love and don't love about your products and services, and how they might suggest improving them. Many of today's surveys offer incentives for responding, such as a contest, a discount on the customer's next purchase of a product, or a free meal at a restaurant chain.

- 2. Use routine customer support calls as a way to collect feedback.** This might mean routinely polling customers while they're already on the phone, such as during a request for information. At the end of these calls, support reps often ask whether they've delivered great service, and what more the customer might need. Perhaps consider adding: "Is there anything else you can think of that would enable our products or services to better assist you?" Or even, "What would it take to make you a 'raving fan' of our company?"

- 3. Research your customers' potential circumstances of use.** You may need to interview sample customers, analyze, or just use your imagination about what could happen if customers tried to use your offerings in risky or incomplete states — under non-optimal conditions — when it would be hard to answer their questions or provide assistance if something failed. Examples include during off-hours, in remote locations, in bad weather, or in isolated conditions. Would your products or services be able to complete the action flawlessly, or, almost as ideally, halt the action intelligently and harmlessly?

- 4. Research and test different proposals before finalizing what to do.** Just because customers revealed that they wanted "X" does not necessarily mean your first idea for accomplishing "X" is the optimal way to go about it. If customers suggest that you add a Web catalog store, you'd want to weigh the cost, design, technical, bandwidth, and usability tradeoffs at a minimum.
