

# Putting Customers in the “Wish Mode”

by Jason Magidson and Gregg Brandyberry



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**tool**

## Putting Customers in the “Wish Mode”

Don't settle for just making your product better.  
Let your customers make it great.

*by Jason Magidson and Gregg Brandyberry*

Everyone knows you have to listen to your customers and find out what they want. Each day, hundreds, if not thousands, of focus groups meet to try to discern customers' needs and create products or services that will address them. But few companies fully capitalize on those opportunities. Why? Because they essentially ask people, “How can we make our product or service better?” That approach will result in incremental improvements, but it hardly leads to real advances. Here's a method for picking your customers' brains that reflects a subtle shift in approach—one that can yield major advances.

Companies typically engage their customers in product development in one of three ways. They design *for* the users, relying on in-house experts to decide what customers need. They design *with* the users, interviewing customers to get their input about product requirements and then retreating to do the design themselves. Less frequently, they let their customers take over: design *by* the

users. End users are asked not only to specify the product requirements but also to sketch out in rough terms what the product would look like and how they would use it. The company then works with a subset of those customers to develop a prototype, which is repeat-

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edly refined based on feedback from the larger group.

In one version of this third approach, customers are asked to dream up their ideal product or service—or, as we put it, to shift into “wish mode.” The benefits of going this route are amply demonstrated in the design of a store that home-furnishings retailer IKEA opened several years ago in Chicago. At the

time, IKEA was aiming to grow in North America by creating stronger bonds with its customers, in part through the creation of a more compelling shopping experience. So it assembled nine groups of roughly a dozen customers each to get their ideas about the new store's design. To ensure that the groups would focus on creating an ideal store rather than merely come up with an improved version of the company's existing stores, they were given the following initial instructions: “Assume that all IKEA stores have been destroyed last night and that new ones will be designed from scratch.”

Against that backdrop, group members were asked to create a list of specifications for the ideal IKEA shopping experience. Among the responses were these: “I never feel disoriented because I always know exactly where I am in relation to every department.” “If I am buying one item, all of the other items that go with it are nearby.” “Shopping is a pleasant, relaxing experience.”

Eliciting such ideal specifications



ILLUSTRATION: RACHAL OXLEY

requires some guidance and coaxing. Members have to be encouraged to focus on what they want (“there ought to be fast checkout, with the option for self-checkout.”) instead of what they don’t want (“there shouldn’t be long checkout lines”). That’s because wishes phrased in the negative can sap energy from a group’s discussion and restrict free-flowing interaction. People must also be told not to worry at this stage about whether an idea is too expensive or otherwise difficult to implement; such concerns can stifle imaginative thinking and lead to self-censorship.

In a second—often overlooked—part of the process, IKEA’s customers were asked to come up with a design for the Chicago store that fulfilled their wish list of requirements. Clearly, the final design required expert technical advice and involved trade-offs between customers’ desires and costs. But the basic

elements sketched out by IKEA’s customer groups were reflected in the final store, which opened in 1998.

To help customers better navigate through the store, IKEA created a three-story octagonal-shaped building, with a central atrium that serves as the shoppers’ home base. From there, they can easily locate the eight departments on each floor. Related products are grouped together; near sofas, for instance, are lamps, pillows, curtains, frames, and CD holders. A restaurant serving Swedish food on the top floor contributes to the store’s pleasant ambience. To speed the checkout process, IKEA increased the number of large items shoppers can retrieve from a self-service warehouse.

Were IKEA’s customers satisfied with the design? A survey reported that 85% of people coming to the store rated the shopping experience “excellent or very

good.” None rated it “poor” or even “fair.” Return visits to the Chicago store are higher and shoppers spend an average of one hour longer than they do at other IKEA stores. An additional 50,000 square feet are being added to the store in part because sales were twice what had originally been expected.

This design-by-users approach need not be limited to consumer products or even to external customers; organizations can use it to develop new internal processes, as well. For example, we recently employed the process at GlaxoSmithKline to help create a global Web-based system to improve the way our procurement group manages supplier contracts. This system will soon be licensed to other companies. The process has expanded to include internal users from the procurement, manufactur-

ing, marketing, accounts payable, finance, and quality control departments, who used the wish mode process to design other systems. We found, as we did with IKEA, that freeing customers to design their ideal product or experience resulted in a wealth of ideas that would otherwise have remained untapped. ▢

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