

Executive Summary

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During life's more rational moments, no software development executive will ever deny that customer satisfaction is an important goal to achieve. The question is, in the midst of quickly evolving technologies, escalating customer expectations, and increasing competitive pressures, how do you achieve it?

The answer isn't a simple one, nor is it one that can be repeated with any degree of reliability. However, the one certainty is that, to satisfy the client, you need to engage them in a conversation. The results of that conversation need to be shared with everyone who has a need to know, then the results must be translated into action. That's the definition of customer focused.

Customer conversations can come at any point in your project's lifecycle, be between any number of people in either organization (yours or the customer's), and be governed by a variety of protocols. What's important to understand is that these conversations are not random events — they can be engineered into the project's lifecycle.

Common sense dictates that to minimize the risks of not satisfying your customers, you must have an ongoing conversation with them. Listen to their ideas at the onset of your project, and give them an opportunity to follow and

steer its progress. If you ask for customer input early on, there will be no surprises. They will love what you've done for them and eagerly await the new product's arrival. If you have your first conversation with them when you are ready to launch, brace yourself for the worst.

The accompanying *Executive Report* surveys the types of conversations you can have with your customers, from the early strategic planning phases of your project through its development, pilot launch, and full-scale rollout.

To date, most of the emphasis has been on engaging customers in a conversation in the early stages of a project, and again in the later stages. Very little attention has been placed on how to engage customers during the interim development phase.

The bulk of the *Executive Report* is spent discussing, in detail, the mechanics of one technique — the focus group — which has been effectively used during the prototyping/development phases of software development projects.

Focus groups have been used for consumer research purposes since World War II. As a qualitative market research tool, they are not new. However, there are three factors contributing to their increasing use in the software development industry. First,

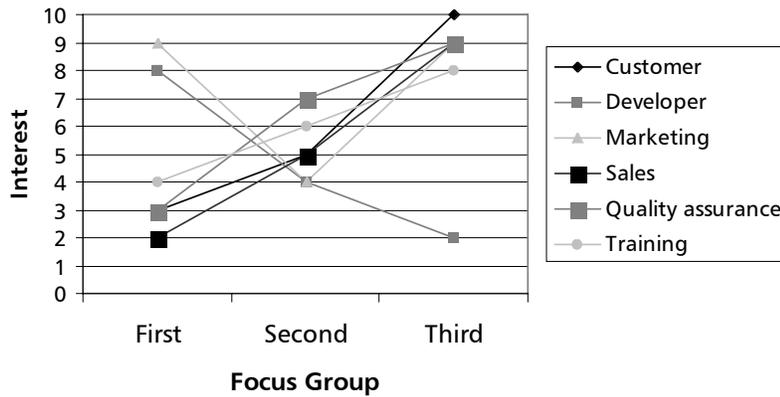
the increasing popularity of the Internet is developing large numbers of demanding users that must be satisfied. Second, advances in application development tools have made the development of working models of software simple to produce. Finally, the evolution of agile software development methodologies has embraced a more participatory and evolutionary approach to satisfying customer requirements. The focus group is a structured meeting that robustly supports these trends.

FOCUS GROUP BENEFITS

There are many benefits that can be gained by inserting focus groups into your project lifecycle. The obvious one is the conversation you'll be facilitating with your customers and the specific feedback they will provide. In discussing the detailed mechanics associated with organizing and conducting a focus group, the report also reveals the many indirect benefits that are experienced. Often, it is these indirect benefits alone that convince organizations to incorporate focus groups into their software development projects.

The indirect benefits enjoyed by the project manager are:

- Project risks and issues are highlighted



- The effectiveness of the development team is reviewed
- An accurate assessment of the technical state of the project occurs
- The target market is identified
- Resources required to successfully launch the product are engaged

Some of the indirect benefits enjoyed by the development team are:

- Executive sponsorship for its project is reinforced
- The target audience is clarified
- Attention is focused on prioritizing the team's work effort

During the project's lifecycle, depending on when the focus group is held, different stakeholders will derive varying degrees of value. For instance, if the focus group is held a week before the product is scheduled to launch, the development team will be much less interested in receiving new feature requests than it would have been earlier in the project. Sales personnel are quite interested in the focus groups immediately prior to product launch because they can get a jumpstart on prospecting. Customers tend to have less patience with the kinds of working models that are presented in the earliest focus groups.

The figure above qualitatively demonstrates how the various stakeholders in a focus group might view the value of the focus group as a function of when it is held during the project's lifecycle.

CONCLUSION

There are only three reasons I can think of why focus groups won't become as popular as beta tests are today. First, it is very hard to find or train world-class facilitators. They must be mature leaders and excellent business analysts. They must also be technically savvy; have a good sense of humor; possess superior communication skills (both presenting and listening); and thrive on the stress of getting in front of, interacting with, and managing groups of people of all levels.

Second, it takes a very mature project manager, and an enlightened project sponsor, to recognize that providing a process and an atmosphere conducive to learning is more important than any one person having all of the right answers.

Finally, even if you have a great facilitator and an organization that recognizes the importance of providing a forum for their customers' voice, there is the small matter of really listening to your customers. That's the last great hurdle.

E-PROJECT MANAGEMENT ADVISORY SERVICE

SENIOR CONSULTANTS

JIM HIGHSMITH, DIRECTOR

SCOTT W. AMBLER

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LOU RUSSELL

ROB THOMSETT

COLIN TULLY

RICHARD ZULTNER

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on Cutter Consortium's e-Project Management Advisory Service or its other Advisory, Resource Center, or Consulting Services, contact:

Tel: +1 781 648 8700 or, within

North America, +1 800 964 5118;

Fax: +1 781 648 1950 or, within

North America, +1 800 888 1816;

E-mail: sales@cutter.com.

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