

Creative Consumer Workshops

A Dialogue for Innovation

Consumers are often asked to participate in a company's new product/service and marketing program development process, generally through well known market research techniques including surveys and focus groups. These methods traditionally do not engage the consumer directly with those in the company responsible for new product design, process innovation, and new advertising campaigns. Rather, management remains "behind the glass" (literally or figuratively) as observers.

In an era when open-source software development and on-line communities are common, a direct dialogue between consumers and product developers can lead to unexpected but highly desirable innovation. It is with this in mind that DRI offers the Creative Consumer Workshop to its clients. These sessions recruit "creative consumers" to work with client team members *in the same room*.

The workshops:

- ... Are led by a Synectics® trained facilitator;
- ... Treat consumers and clients equally and all ideas as "fair game" in order to find relevant solutions;
- ... Foster creativity via exercises that encourage participants to view the subject in different ways and from different perspectives.

The Program

Typically, we schedule two or three workshops with creative consumers and the management team. Following this, the Facilitator's Easel Notes are produced and distributed to the client team – usually within three days. Then an internal strategy session is conducted by the facilitator to collectively share findings and decide on implications and next steps. Before this session, it is expected that client participants review the notes from the consumer sessions and earmark issues and ideas of importance to them, amplify on comments, and sketch out implementation of next steps.

The Role of the "Creative Consumer":

To optimize the direct dialogue with product or program developers, specially screened consumers are selected for participation. These are individuals who, among other qualities, are demonstrably thoughtful, playful, risk taking, early adopters. Identification of these individuals is accomplished via specific screening questions designed to test for these characteristics. These include questions taken from a psychological inventory that has a high correlation with creativity. DRI's experience working with field recruiters to locate creative consumers has resulted in "time tested" successful recruiting.

Generally, six consumers are selected per workshop. We often suggest including participants who are outside of the target market but who are unusually productive respondents, as the role of the creative consumer is to push beyond expected responses to generate new ideas and approaches. They may also challenge conventional points of view – including those held by management!



The Role of the Client: The client should expect to have five or six team members who are involved directly or peripherally with the product or program in development. There should be some management team continuity across the two workshops; this can be the market research representative. We suggest that client team members also be selected for creativity. Their role must change from observation and listening to *active participation and exchange* with creative consumers, with the intention of building on the ideas offered by participants. Client team members should come with an open mind and be prepared to stretch out of their own comfort zone. The focus is on the potential (rather than the obstacles) of each idea.

The Role of the Facilitator: The facilitator manages the entire Creative Consumer Workshop process, beginning with the development of a Task Statement co-authored with the client. S/he then assumes group leadership and guides workshop participants through a series of specially-created exercises that generate ideas. The process is completed with a focus on next-steps and an action plan.

The facilitator captures what is typically a prodigious output from the creative consumer sessions – generally hundreds of ideas – each of which is named, articulated with two or three features, and referenced with specific end-user benefits. In addition to capturing the ideas, the facilitator provides his/her take on “higher order” key themes, salient messages and prevalent issues, creating a content framework usually represented by a visual or schematic.

In combination with the Easel Notes, this framework is used as the basis for the

strategy session led by the facilitator. The strategy session involves the client team only, and the results are captured and organized in categories such as “*Surprises*”, “*Best Ideas*”, “*Consumer Needs, Wants, Wishes*”, “*Key Takeaways for Senior Management*”, etc. An action agenda of next steps is established and client team members take collective ownership of moving forward on the plan in a timely fashion. In a typical next step the most promising ideas can be converted directly into concepts suitable for testing via one or another conventional research method.

The Benefits

The process of interacting with creative consumers in facilitated ideation sessions, combined with output captured, organized and shared quickly in a facilitated client strategy session, opens up a new level of possibility for product, service, or marketing strategy development. The roles and contributions of both categories of participant are stretched for maximum productivity, and the process is highly disciplined and tightly managed to achieve optimal results.

Dialogue Resource is a marketing research and consulting firm located in Boston MA.

