

THE CUSTOMER INTERACTION GAME

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Abstract

This paper describes a cooperation between a SME (Small- and Medium sized Enterprise) and a design researcher, and explores the possibilities for new forms of customer interaction. The aim was to find a strategy for both marketing and customer feedback of new products. The feedback is analyzed on a general level and used in the further development of the products and marketing, but the analysis also aim to find cultural differences between the customer groups. The marketing is directed to international customer groups with many language obstacles and the context of the sessions require a special kind of testing material. The sessions and the material are therefore designed as a game which both makes it interesting for the customers and force them to make decisions and remember the products.

1. Introduction

This research is part of a larger research and development program in cooperation between the University of Lapland and the Finnish playground manufacturer, Lappset Group Ltd. The project involves different research projects which the design group is implementing into new concepts for the playground by designing playground equipment where learning, technology and physical activity is connected. A pilot playground will be ready in the summer of 2005 and the ready products are launched in 2006.

1.2 Marketing as an opportunity for research

From December 2004 to April 2005, Lappset received visits from international customer groups on a weekly basis. Each groups consisted of 10 to 20 customers such as city council representatives, architects and urban planners, about 250 visitors in total. This project was started with the idea of marketing the new product line as well as getting the customer's feedback before the launch. The research aim was to study the general preferences of the visitors and cultural variations between the countries. The information would be valuable in the further development and marketing of the products. Because of the aims and the context, the method had to special and was therefore a question of design itself.

1.3 Research as an opportunity for marketing

This project is about designing a new form of market communication that is not a one-way communication but which allows the customers to participate and give feedback. Being a passive observer to a presentation leaves few strong impressions and there is no real contact between the presenter and the customer, which is very important in a marketing situation. Research shows that this kind of experiential communication draws more attention and instills a stronger memory than more ordinary forms of communication [12]. This project was about creating a different and stimulating experience. Active participation has been promoted by Buchenau and Suri [2] as a way to convey experiences about a product to the user. Their method of letting designers and users experience prototypes allows the designer and user to understand the needs, problems and opportunities together. This project tries to transfer these ideas to the marketing of the products.

A method much used in Scandinavia is design research games where active user participation is central. This kind of research activity makes the participants involved, it is fun but it takes their concerns seriously [5]. These games have been used mainly for design development where the participants have been involved over a longer period of time. Our project involves short time participation, but the idea of active participation and pleasurable involvement are equally relevant to our context.

In marketing it is important to consider the various “noise” factors that can affect the communication, such as lack of language skills and culturally based misinterpretations [3]. In this case several of the customers do not speak any, or very poor English, and we could not rely on too much written information, like questionnaires. Based on the idea of active participation, the research material was designed as a game with picture cards and boards. This meant that the customers had to get up on their feet and actually do something. In the tradition of design games the idea is not to encourage competition, nor is it to teach theory, but to support shared action and reflection [5]. By activating the customers this way they were forced to make decisions and form opinions about the products, and they got the feeling that their opinions were of importance to the design process.

Most of the literature on marketing and customer relations, deal with the direct experiences of, and connection between the product or service providers, and the user-customer. Ottosson [11] uses the term “pure user” and “pure consumer”. Usually the distinctions between the two are only marginal, but when it comes to playground equipment the decision makers are completely different people than the users, namely the children. They are seldom consulted and their actual needs are often completely forgotten when the facilities are being designed [4]. Nevertheless the marketing must be directed to the buyers and their decisions must be relied on despite possible lack of contact with the users. It was important in this project to use the research findings from our studies with children in the material, as the customers are, after all, interested in the children’s real needs for a safe, fun and challenging environment.

1.4 Cultural differences

For designers it is important to have an understanding of cultural aspects and what functional, social and aesthetical preferences might affect the design. Kitchen appliances are for instance viewed differently in Northern- and Southern Europe. Whereas people in Northern Europe want to get the household chores done in a quick and fun way, people in Southern Europe see cooking and household as something serious that holds strong traditions and their view of the products and how they should look, changes accordingly [10]. In the case of playground equipment there might be differences concerning perceptions on childhood and outdoor activities. Is for instance, physical activity valued more than learning new skills? Is creativity more important than exploration? Although these questions are of an individual nature, there are probably cultural differences which could be of importance to the design and marketing of the playground equipment.

1.5 Generating knowledge and value in a company

It is a new notion in the business world that one of the paths to innovation is work in multidisciplinary teams. This working group is exactly this kind of team, where designers work with engineers, pedagogical and technology experts. It makes it possible for the different disciplines to join their expertise and create a common view and a shared experience [2]. This

project could be said to take this notion one step further as it involves a designer stepping into the discipline of marketing. The designer brings design issues and design thinking into the marketing and creates a shared experience with the customers.

Various forms of participatory design are now encouraged in the business community as a way to promote innovation and knowledge [2]. Companies realize that the products they sell must be designed with a proper understanding of the user's needs in order to compete in the market. It is not enough to simply design a product that functions. It must simultaneously meet the user's functional, social and aesthetic preferences in order to be relevant. A company that loses relevance is quickly seen as being old-fashioned and will gradually lose customers [12]. Using new methods for innovation and development is therefore important. Although Lappset is a medium-sized enterprise and their success rely more on quality products and services than building a unique brand profile, they need to be at the front of the development if they are to compete. The strategy of marketing through research is something that can contribute to giving Lappset an image as relevant and inventive, and through this, attract the customers.

2. Designing the method

Because the sessions with the customers was limited to one hour, the method had to be both efficient and easy to explain and carry through. The different factors affecting the context of the research made it challenging to design a testing method that was both informative as well as interesting. One of the inspirations for the method came from the Ideo Method Cards [9]. These cards describes methods that can give new and surprising angles to a problem, they show the clients perception and understanding of the design issues and help to evaluate and prioritize design features and concepts. Instead of adopting one method, several provided inspiration for the unique method that was required.

“Cultural probes” is another strategy for pursuing experimental design with the help of material like picture cards, maps and cameras [7]. The material is brought into the user's environment and used creatively to tell about personal experiences. This strategy would not have been possible in this research, both because of the context and number of visitors. However, this kind of material can convey the designer's personal experiences to the user, and this is something that was interesting to our case. The images used in our cards were selected based on our own understanding of the different concepts and how we interpret them, and thus became quite personal and unique in their style and content.

We ended up with a design for a card game that borrowed elements from the Ideo cards, cultural probes and design games, but that was more simple and intuitive to use. In the game three sets of cards; notions, styles and products, are evaluated from one to ten. There are ten cards for each category and three separate boards. When the boards had been filled in they were photographed for further analysis.

The research topics were developed in cooperation with the other product designers. We decided to use pictures of different styles that would represent colours, materials and certain features, such as futuristic, traditional and sporty. Futuristic would for instance imply metallic surfaces, clear colours like metallic blue or bright orange, unusual shapes and an interesting use of lights. The use of analogies like this in design research is a quite popular way of getting a common understanding of a product's features [1]. By using concepts and images, real or mental, the participants can get an easy understanding of the designer's intentions. The images in the notion

cards were supposed to be symbols or metaphors of the social aspects we have tried to bring forward in the design of the products, such as feelings of community, mental challenge and creativity. The third set of cards had images of the products, but as they are still confidential, they can not be discussed in this paper.

This research method is a way of educating the non-designers into the way of seeing of the designer so that they, in this case the customer, can share the same vision [1]. Playing the game can be described as a learning process. It creates a common language, investigates future visions and clarifies different aspects of the concepts [5]. By sharing a vision and way of thinking about the products the customer can understand the ideas behind the concepts, what kind of problems the designers are facing and what opportunities the products afford.



FIGURE 1. *The notion- and style-cards*

3. Carrying out the research

The sessions were important for observing how the method works as a marketing strategy. The first group was the Spanish and the expectations were mixed. Would they understand what to do? Would they like it or would they find it pointless and silly? The testing session was very successful and the worries needless. There were some questions about what they were supposed to do and how we defined the concepts, but most got started right away and we told them it was their interpretation we were after. The customers did not speak any English but there were comments like “bonito” and many enthusiastic smiles afterwards. It was obvious that they had

enjoyed the little game that was prepared for them and that they felt they were doing something important in evaluating the confidential concepts.

As the research progressed it was clear that the method worked exceptionally well in getting the customers interest. It triggered discussions about the concepts and the importance of social factors and design in a way that a normal presentation could not have done. Some groups stood out like the Dutch who immediately started discussing and arranging the cards on the floor, on their hands and knees, with great enthusiasm. With the French, the discussion almost took a philosophical turn with some people getting quite passionate about the subjects. The Portuguese would gather around the boards with their coffee cups in the break and discuss between themselves and compare the different selections and reasons for evaluation. With the German group the discussion was directed more towards us with questions about details in the concepts and recommendations for how things could be improved.

An interesting and unexpected thing to note in the sessions was how involved the management and sales representatives were. When entering the room where the game was set up, the management representative would start explaining the game again, talk about it while they were filling in and discuss how the various nationalities had made different selections. This is a strong indication that she acknowledged the value in the marketing and research.



FIGURE 2. *Spanish and Dutch customers playing the game.*

4. Analyzing the material

The data was collected by photographing the boards and then filling it into diagrams where the results for each nation could be compared for the same notion, style and product. In this kind of company value creation, the knowledge must be sought actively and evaluated systematically in order to be of any real use [6]. It was necessary to do a proper analysis of the customer feedback, both to reveal the true information but also to take their contribution seriously. The hypothesis was that it would be possible to draw some general conclusions from the whole research, but also that there would be differences between the nations.

On a general level, there are clearly notions, styles and products that are more popular than others. Some of these were expected, others more surprising. When it comes to the national differences it is very difficult to draw any conclusions. There have been groups from Belgium, Denmark, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Iceland and Sweden and two groups from both France and Germany and three from Spain. These “double groups” worked as control groups in that we could see if there were similarities within a nation. There are big differences even between the groups from the same country and there does not seem to be any clusters of nations, such as Spain and Portugal, or any big differences between Northern and Southern Europe.

There are some things that stick out in the statistics though. The two German groups had a much stronger preference for both the concepts of community and 3 generations than the other groups. With the French groups the concept of control was both strong and consistent compared to the other nations. Here there are cultural differences. French playgrounds often have a fee and the children are under constant control from adults. In Scandinavia one talks of safety and control meaning stability, some forms of protection but not protection from rough and independent play [8]. One of the French groups had a very low score on the notion of physical challenge and this fits well with a wish for control, but the other French group had the highest score on the same notion, making it difficult to draw any clear conclusions about this. On the general level the notion of control was low and the notion of physical challenge was high so one can draw the conclusion that people, regardless of nationality, value physical activity and freedom to get dirty and make mistakes more than control and supervision of children.

5. Conclusions

At the end of the study a report was presented to the company with the results of the research and recommendations for how the feedback can be used in the further development. For example it is obvious that products which encourage creativity, such as drawing, building and narrating are popular. Because excitement is seen as important, products with movements and speed should be a focus area as well as products which allow children to explore the environment, for instance through maps, information points and science equipment. Even though the notion of 3 generations was unpopular, this study does not recommend stopping the focus on it, but rather to concentrate on marketing it in new and interesting ways and create systems that facilitates the interaction between generations, for instance through the more popular notions like creativity, excitement and exploration.

Adventure was by far the most popular of the styles and one recommendation would be to produce devices for children’s narratives. Special towers, caves, platforms and closed in spaces can function as castles, boats, spaceships and so on. The styles sporty and playful were also popular and indicate a preference for bright colours, unusual shapes and details like rubber grips and steps. The final report will not follow the statistics completely, but use it as a way to support some design features, strengthen others and give recommendations for new ideas.

Due to the context many compromises had to be made to the method. Surprisingly, very few compromises had to be done regarding the relation between the marketing and research. The marketing and research aspects were easy to integrate with each other in the design of the material. One drawback concerning the research aim was that it could not go more in-depth. It was disappointing not to find more on the cultural differences and reach that aim of the research, but on the other hand, the results on the general level gave very interesting results and clear answers to more overall questions.

For the company this kind of experiential marketing is valuable as a way of generating knowledge within the firm and communicate the various aspects of the products in a way that is interesting and memorable to the customers. The Lappset management was very happy about the way it involved the customers and made them talk and remember the products. The method can be used again by changing the content but there is also a potential for further development when it comes to the way the game is played and how the data is gathered and analyzed. The possibilities for developing methods for participative design and marketing should be many and also spark discussions about the value of this kind of activity. According to this research the application of methodologies from the tradition of experiential marketing and participative design supports the combination of marketing and design research and opens up new possibilities for customer interaction.

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