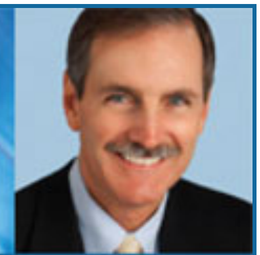
B2B Organic Growth Newsletter

New Product Blueprinting *by* Dan Adams

Growth strategies for companies that supply businesses - not consumers

Nov-Dec, 2012

The Asia-Pacific Interviewing Challenge

Every time I come to Shanghai (where I'm now writing this), it seems like I'm in a new city: You can practically *feel* the place growing around you. Nearly all our clients have major operations here to tap into the region's explosive growth. At one point or another, all have struggled with this question: "How can we gain keen customer insights in a culturally sensitive way?" They know you can't simply transplant best practices from the U.S. or Europe in a "one-size-fits-all" manner.

We've had the privilege of training hundreds of New Product Blueprinting teams throughout Asia-Pacific… and over the years, *they* have taught us many dos and don'ts. I've compiled some of the top suggestions here… for both setting up and conducting customer interviews. While many of these tips apply around the world, there are indeed some special challenges to be mindful of in Asia-Pacific.

Most of our workshop trainees in Asia are eager to learn new practices… but they don't want to recklessly "experiment" with their customers. So when we ask them to interview using digital projectors, for instance, a common question is, "Will that work here?" What did our clients in Asia already *know*... that I had to *learn*?

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Brace yourself for some generalizations… to which you will certainly find exceptions. My goal is not to "stereotype" and spare you from thinking. My goal is to *stimulate* thinking… as well as observation and a healthy respect for those living in different cultures. In many cases, you may notice three characteristics when interviewing in Asia-Pacific:

1) *Hierarchal*: A high regard is given to those in positions of authority.

2) *Collective*: Employees show respect for colleagues, and

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avoid embarrassing themselves or others.

3) *Non-consultative selling*: In some parts of Asia, “consultative selling” is not yet common; customers expect visiting suppliers will “sell” and not “listen.”

These points don’t require a radical change in behavior for your interviewing team. For instance, whether you’re interviewing in Denver, Dusseldorf, or Dalian, it’s never “in style” to offend your boss or embarrass colleagues. But it is important in Asia to be especially intentional about certain elements of a) setting up interviews, and b) conducting interviews.

Seven Tips for Setting Up Interviews

Setting up interviews is actually a bigger challenge than conducting them. How do you explain what you’d like to accomplish… especially if the approach is unfamiliar to the customer, and they are keen to avoid an embarrassing situation? Here are seven tips.

1. Use your best contacts: Try to engage someone who *already* has a prior relationship with the target customer. Check your organization for someone who knows someone at this account. If the market is new to you, hire an industry expert—someone who has developed strong relationships in this industry. Interview this expert first, and then ask them for help in setting up interviews where *they* are welcome. When possible, try to make contact with people at higher levels in the target account… because their approval will encourage subordinates to participate.

2. It’s a process, not an event: Focus on the relationship, not the interview. Make it clear you’re not interested in just a single interview: This is a process in which you intend to stay engaged, continue understanding their needs, and build a long-term relationship *they* will find fruitful and enjoyable. If you follow up with quantitative interviewing—something we strongly suggest—you may offer to share your overall “industry results” with those who participated in these interviews. Make it clear you won’t disclose which specific people or companies were interviewed.

3. Be clear about your intentions: When you ask for the interview, carefully explain why you are requesting it. People are less suspicious when they fully understand your motives. Let them know you want to go beyond “guessing” at customers’ needs: You don’t want your R&D trying to “answer questions customers are not asking.” Bottom line: This is the customers’ opportunity to have *your* R&D working on *their* problems.

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They might expect you to come with “some answers,” and this is natural. But explain that you’d like to do this in two stages: First truly understand their

Product Blueprinting through TEAM e-MMERSION TM (PDMA Visions, Oct. 2010).

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Today's Quote

“ Always remember you’re unique. Just like everyone else. ”

—Anonymous

explain that you'd like to do this in *two* stages. First truly understand their needs, and *then* work on solutions… which you hope to bring at a later meeting. If they insist you show something to them, present your technological capabilities and possibilities, not specific solutions… stressing you want to first understand and focus on *their* needs.

4. It's not a sales call: Make it clear you won't be doing any selling or solving. Promise to bring important people with you… perhaps an executive from your company, a knowledgeable person visiting this region, or a well-established technical expert. Don't ask your local sales representatives to request these interviews if they have not been properly trained. Review your interview plan with your sales representatives, and then conduct a role-play interview with them before the actual interview.

5. Request the interview in person: It often makes sense to ask for the interview in person, instead of using a phone call. This lets your contact privately ask questions and discuss any concerns they may have about what will take place. During this face-to-face pre-meeting, you might quickly demonstrate how you will take notes (demonstrating how the sticky notes work in a Blueprinting Discovery Interview, for instance).

6. Help your customer contact: An important part of interviewing is getting the right customer contacts in the room. Consider how your contact will invite his or her colleagues. When you request an interview orally, many of the details get lost, so be sure to email them a document that they can forward to their colleagues. In this document, include not only an agenda, but also the purpose and "what's in it for them." Check out this example for Blueprinting Discovery Interviews: http://www.haveyoubeendiscovered.com. (Please use drop-down menu in upper-right to view in nine languages.)

7. Consider who to invite: Open conversation can be stifled if a) there are too many people in the room, or b) there are too many organizational levels… because everyone may wait for the "big boss" to speak first. You may do fine interviewing six or eight customer contacts in Toronto, but two or three interviewees might be better in Tokyo.

Three Tips for Conducting Interviews

Let's assume you are doing a "proper" Discovery Interview, with Blueprinter software that's projecting sticky notes (into which your team will type customer comments). And assume your customer has never seen such a thing before. How do you avoid a jarring or awkward situation?

1. Carefully explain the meeting purpose: First, assume at least some of the attendees have not heard, understood, or remembered why you are conducting this interview. Go over the same points you used you are conducting this interview. Go over the same points you used to set up the meeting, and ask for any questions. Be open and say you are using a new method that will help you do a better job of listening to them… a method that is gaining popularity world-wide. Stress that you think they'll like this, because they can see your notes and suggest changes. Tell them, "This way, everything you want us to have in our notes will be there… and nothing else."

2. Ask for their permission: Ask if you can "try" this for a few minutes to see if they do indeed like it. If they don't like it, you can offer to write your notes on a notepad. Wait for their approval before you even begin projecting your note-taking software (e.g., Blueprinter). If the projector is turned on, simply project a slide reading, "Thank you for meeting with us." In short, put yourself in the customer's position, and be very thoughtful and sensitive about your entire introduction.

3. Use the local language: Record your sticky notes in a language the customer is comfortable with. Of course, your note taker will need to be particularly fluent in this language. If one or more of your interview team colleagues doesn't speak the local language, put a few summary words at the end of relevant sticky notes in a language they do understand (e.g., English) to help them follow along during the interview. For projects being managed by a global team, consider translating outcome statements and key sticky notes into a common team language when debriefing after the Discovery Interview.

Learning More…

Truly understanding the needs of B2B customers is no trivial task *anywhere*… and Asia-Pacific brings added challenges. But it also brings enormous opportunities. Just think of the competitive advantage your company can build by deeply understanding the needs of rapidly growing markets. I know some suppliers are doing this now: I often receive emails from companies in Asia asking for more information about Blueprinting… because *they* had just been interviewed by an AIM client. Exciting for me, sure… but imagine how they now regard these suppliers who showed great interest in them, and from whom they have just learned a new practice. Priceless!

If you'd like to learn more about this subject, just email us at information@newproductblueprinting.com. In addition to more specific interviewing tips, we can advise the best way for an organization to introduce training and drive implementation globally. For existing AIM clients, don't forget you have many Blueprinting tools at your disposal for setting up and conducting interviews…

1) Link to send interview candidates, http://www.haveyoubeendiscovered.com

2) *Phone Set-up Script,* with key points to make when requesting interviews

3) *Discovery Interview Quick Start Card*, to review with sales

3) *Discovery Interview Quick-Start Card*, to review with sales reps prior to interviews

4) *Discovery Interview Agenda Template,* in Microsoft Word so you can modify it

All of the above are available in nine languages. If you need fresh copies of anything, contact us at information@newproductblueprinting.com. And best wishes on those interviews!