



Need VOC? Try VRT. Avoid focus groups to capture voice of the customer.

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For decades companies have been trying to understand their customers and grow their businesses by taking their new ideas to the worst possible venue to seek customer input – the focus group. While the effort is well intended, it also deeply flawed.

Here's what we've learned about focus group testing for insights and why we moved away from the troubled format years ago. Perhaps this example sounds familiar:

Ten strangers try to arrive on time to a foreign location.

This is a profoundly unnatural event and they are all very self-conscious.

Some are engaged and vocal, most far less so.

An Alpha emerges and completely dominates the conversation.

They tell you what you should be doing.

The quiet ones, still self-conscious, nod along.

You receive shallow opinions vs deep insights.

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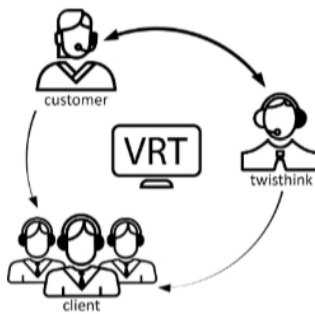
You question the value and validity of the group's feedback.

Now what?

This outdated model of gleaning the voice of the customer can do more harm than good for the company that is serious about bringing innovative ideas to life. Although there's no perfect process, there is a better way to obtain actionable customer insights. We call it a "Visual Research Tool", shortened to "VRT."

WHAT IS A VRT?

A VRT places emphasis on a clear story and deep visual engagement of the new idea being shared. Instead of trying to describe a product or experience with just words, where the image in one person's head is different from the image someone else conjures up, visuals are carefully crafted and masterfully used to consistently align every customer interaction. This leaves no opportunity for misunderstanding the product, facilitates deeper understanding and allows better communication.



HOW VRTs WORK – THE 20-20-20 MODEL

To begin with the VRT is created in deep collaboration with the Client. The cross functional team works hard to capture the best version of the story BUT does not try to perfect the story. Ever heard of paralysis of analysis? Instead we strive to document the best-known User Experience knowing full well it won't be entirely right. And that's OK. The VRT itself is sacrificial. It's used to uncover insights for the Ideal User Experience. Not BE the Ideal User Experience. That's a fundamental difference. A VRT is a tool and method whose sole purpose is not to be self-validating, rather, to provide hard to reach new insights that drive innovation.

VRTs are best deployed 1 on 1 (2 max). They can be done face-to-face when convenient but work beautifully through video calls like GoTo or WebX to reach customers around the world. Experience has proven that customers are far more comfortable in their own environment which facilitates richer dialog. VRTs are structured for one hour, which are divided into three, 20-minute segments.

- **The First Twenty.** We introduce ourselves and reinforce that nothings recorded, their name will not be attributed to their comments and that we are a 3rd party and cannot be offended by their responses. This creates goodwill, rapport and context, and allows the customers to relax. We get to understand them better by asking what they do, what makes their job interesting or challenging and probe what matters most to them and their business. Then they are ready to hear what's next.
- **The Second Twenty.** We show the customer an exciting new idea in a carefully crafted way.

The story has been honed, we are not “selling” rather explaining what the goal is and how this product, service or experience intends to achieve that goal. What they see on their screen is image intense and text light. Sometimes we present 1 or 2 options because people are naturally very comfortable expressing preferences when presented with options.

- **The Third Twenty.** We ask an introductory wave of very carefully crafted easy high level, open ended questions that progress into specific and detailed questions. Near the end we try to understand how well the offering really resonates with them personally by asking about their purchase intent, price expectation and value perception, and candidly what they like and most importantly what they dislike about these ideas. Because we are an outside partner and not wedded to the concepts, they are comfortable telling us the truth. Clients are able to listen in live and in real time, hearing firsthand feedback from their customers that they’ve never heard (this way) before. They love it!

BUT DO THEY GET RESULTS?

A recent client had this to say about going through the Visual Research Tool process:

“I had never heard of the VRT process before. Furthermore we have been burned many times by wasting money on market, end user and product research that did not yield the desired insights. But we felt compelled to “do something”. Sadly I believe businesses can actually resign themselves to this “just spend the budget and check the box” fate. This results in boring reports nobody reads or understands filled with artificially simplified 2x2 charts that inspire nothing.” ([Read full case study here.](#))

By contrast when TT walked me through the VRT process it immediately resonated with me and my team. The true test of this being how many of us literally showed up to listen in to each call. We always had several members attend each call because everyone viewed it as a great investment of their time. I recall shifting from sitting at my desk to donning a headset, standing in front of an 8’ markerboard and taking notes, drawing diagrams while our customers spoke. This was totally invigorating. Then I would take a picture of the board for my records and later use during the Analyze Phase.”

“If you have a product that you believe has the capacity to capture the market, you need to unbiasedly examine how you’re going to innovate and feed that product with info to change it as fast of customer will want. If we tried to do VRT on our own, we couldn’t get there as fast, and we learned that speed is crucial.”

When it comes to solving problems and coming up with innovative solutions, rich dialog about the User Experience sets us up to extract better insights to thrill the customer. Unbiased partners who can design and lead VRTs are invaluable. VRTs provide a way to accurately hear the VOC and understand what they mean to then discern what we should do. We often refer to this as the *Say, Mean, Do Process*. With VRT insights in hand, we have the ability to move faster, improve the idea, and ultimately create a product, service or experience that people will love to use and vocally advocate to others.

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