Bringing empathy to product design

There's never been a better time to understand our customers. We have access to gazillions of data sets on every minor and major moment of the customer journey. And customers are accustomed to telling us what they want—in focus groups and feedback forms, by email, text, and phone, on social media, and in forums.

We're drowning in data. But does that translate to better product design for our users? Not always.

We know what our customers' pain points are but our job as product people is bigger than simply addressing what the data tells us. We need to put ourselves in the shoes of our customers and truly know what they know, think what they think, and feel what they feel. Only then can we do our magic prioritization alchemy to build the things that aren't just what customers want, but what they need.

We have to understand—if not all, then most of the humans using our products—to make sure we're building the right things. Here are a few ways to make that happen.

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Check your assumptions at the door

Our brains are hard-wired to make assumptions. It's not a bad thing; why reinvent a process or a product if we can build on what's been done before?

The trouble starts when we over-index and get it wrong. We might assume our users are a lot like us. Like the executive I once worked with on building a mobile product—a man who had three assistants and a driver. He said, "I don't like that pesky little number on the notifications on my apps. We shouldn't have those in our products." He's not your average app user.

I'm guilty of making assumptions, too. One of my first product management jobs was faxing out information to plastics manufacturers. I thought, "Who wants to fax? I'm going to build a killer portal online and they can log in and fill out the forms, upload information and post RFPs." It was a great idea... until I visited one of the plants and noted that there was one lonely computer stuffed in a back office where they did their finances. They loved the fax. They are probably still using the fax. The fax worked for them.

We are not the people we're building for. Our customers are. We need to check our experiences, preferences, and ideas of what we think we know about them at the door.

Deepen relationships with customers

One of the places you can get exposure to real customers is where I call the "PM torture chamber." It's where you sit quietly watching user testing and hearing people say horrible things about the feature you just poured your entire life into.

But there's a better alternative: get out in the world and share meals, a beer, a coffee, or a consensual hug with your customers. Ask them about their kids, their hobbies, their favorite movies or sports teams. Watch them work. Understand their lives. Know the name of their pet hedgehog.

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You won't be able to meet all of them, but a sampling is a lot better than dry data points and user journey flows. The data might tell you a lot about the what and the where and the how, but not so much the why. Why are they getting stuck on a particular page? Why did one of the features go through the roof and another didn't? Why are they resistant to a workflow that makes perfect sense in the algorithm?

When you understand the people using your products, you'll find a kind of love for them. When faceless data points have names, it's a lot harder to do wrong by them. It's not so easy to end-of-life a feature when the replacement is nowhere in sight. Or thrust a new feature at customers without investing in tools to help them know how to use it. We don't hurt the ones we love.

Design for your customers... and their customers

Sometimes the needs of the people who pay for our products are at odds with the people who use them. No consumer ever wished YouTube would throw an ad in the middle of a Colbert video, but some product manager had to make that happen so their customer (YouTube) could make money.

As product people, we need to know all sides of the "user" and our "customer." That includes thinking about the different parts. Managers want compliance; users want flexibility. End users want support; companies would rather not pick up the phone because it's expensive. Your job is making both sides as happy as possible, in as painless a way as possible.

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The trick is to put yourself in the shoes of both customer segments. And aim for a balance that serves the people who are funding you without alienating the people who are actually using the products.

Ask questions and listen in equal measure

It's critical to ask your customers about their pain points, their needs, their greatest desires, their workflow, and get all the details you think you need before designing a product.

But listening—and not just to the answers to our own questions—is just as

important. Asking questions is great, but truly listening turns out to be a lot harder.

Early in my career, I went to a bunch of briefing meetings with customers and had the opportunity to listen to our customers talk to each other. I learned how their business worked in a way that I never would have if I'd been asking questions and taking down answers. We had one idea of a customer persona, but it was the wrong one! I gained insights that allowed us to build products that would serve them better. By listening.

Embrace openness and air grievances

A fun feature of every event we do at Zendesk is the "airing of grievances." I get on stage with our product managers and anyone who's at our free events—from the tiniest to the biggest customer—can ask us absolutely anything. A roadmap. A feature that's bothering them. Tech support.

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It's part-therapy and another way to put a human face on our customers and ourselves. When it comes to building relationships with customers, it's important to be open to everything, good and bad. That's the kind of transparency that creates deeper bonds.

When we invest in meaningful relationships with our customers by considering the world from their point of view, we gain more than just loyalty. We gain a whole new way of looking at the work we do and why we do it. And everybody wins.