

Why Is It So Hard to Know What Customers Want?



Bottom line up front: In many cases, it's hard for us to know what customers want because we've fallen into an "inward mindset."

What does this mean?

When we have an inward mindset, we are self-focused. We see our own needs, objectives, and challenges but are blind to what's going on for others.

Let's illustrate an inward mindset with a few scenarios.

Scenario 1

A salesperson, Alex, is an incredibly hard worker. She spends hours on the phone and carefully follows up on emails. Yet her sales are down. Worried about her numbers, she spends more hours in the office, calls potential clients more often, and sends them more emails. As a result, prospective clients think she's pushy and doesn't listen.

Scenario 2

A marketing department is charged with writing regular blog posts that engage the organization's target customers. Concerned with their publication timeline, they solicit blog ideas from nearby colleagues in the organization—who do not represent their target audience. As a result, they write posts that employees inside the organization love but that external readers find confusing, jargon-y, and unrelatable.

Scenario 3

A nonprofit organization's mission is to improve the lives of women in rural villages. After learning the women in a particular village had to walk more than an hour per day to get water, the nonprofit built a well in the center of the village. The women of the village sabotaged the well, destroying it. Why? They valued the hour together—their only time to socialize—more than having water nearby. The nonprofit had not actually improved their lives by building the well.

What do these scenarios have in common? The person's, team's, or organization's focus is turned inward, toward their own needs, objectives, and challenges. Alex focused on her sales goals and became pushy. The marketing department focused on its timeline and wrote irrelevant pieces. The nonprofit addressed the presenting issue rather than the underlying need.

In all three scenarios, the protagonists don't know what their customers want because they haven't gotten curious: they aren't alive to what's going on for those they're trying to serve. This is quite common, because the self-focused inward mindset prevents us from being curious—even when we have good intentions.

Here are three tips to help understand what customers want.

1. **Consider, “What job are they hiring me for?”**

Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen developed the theory of “Jobs to Be Done,” explained in more detail in [this Harvard Business Review article](#). This phrase is a simple, concise way to probe into your customers’ needs, challenges, and goals. What problems are they trying to solve through your product or service?

At Arbinger, we use a process called SAM to help us learn about jobs to be done in a systematic way. SAM stands for, “See Others,” “Adjust Efforts,” and “Measure Impact.” Read more about SAM [here](#).

1. **Ask lots of people.** Too often (we at Arbinger included!), we assume we know what our customers want. We might come up with an idea, bounce it off a couple of colleagues who happen to be nearby, and launch the idea assuming we’ve done sufficient due diligence.

This approach might suffice in some cases. But we’re taking the risk that our idea is totally off-base. Just because a few colleagues agree with us doesn’t mean we’re truly plugged into our customers’ needs, challenges, and objectives. Instead, go out and ask a wide range of customers about themselves. Get curious! What makes them tick? What are their headaches? Their goals?

1. **Measure and adjust.** It’s critical to set up a regular feedback loop with customers. Surveys can be very helpful in this regard. Make sure to include questions that help confirm or revise your hypotheses about your customers’ jobs to be done. In addition, implement a regular cadence of personal check-ins with a representative sample of customers. Ask them how they’re doing, what their challenges are, and what they you could do better.

Use these two sources of feedback to adjust your efforts accordingly. And do prepare yourself to make adjustments! Sometimes when we have an idea we really like, it's hard to let go even when it becomes obvious that customers wouldn't find the idea valuable. To mitigate this tendency, refocus on developing that curiosity about your customers. What do they need, and how can you be most helpful?