# Book Reviews

**How Customers Think: Essential Insights in the Mind of the Market**, by Gerald Zaltman. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2003. 321+xxii pages. $29.95.

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Gerald Zaltman's *How Customers Think* presents both a theoretical framework for understanding "the mind of the market" and richly detailed examples and processes that will help the practitioner to follow his logic and to implement his suggestions. Zaltman challenges managers' use of marketing and marketing research, which, he claims, "serves mainly to reinforce existing conclusions, not to test or develop new possibilities." Barriers, including "an organizational climate that provides no incentives to take risks, no fiscal resources to collect worthwhile information, and no time to think deeply about such information," keep organizations stuck in a paradigm that "prevents marketers from understanding and serving customers effectively" (p. 7).

Zaltman's objective in *How Customers Think* is to help organizations and marketers change their paradigms about the market and their customers. "Only by reconnecting the splintered pieces of their thinking about consumers can companies truly grasp and meet consumer's needs more effectively—and thus survive in today's competitive and rapidly shifting business environment" (p. xi).

Although the book targets mainly marketers of consumer products, product developers in other industries will find the content useful to the extent that they are able and willing to think of their role in the value chain as ultimately resulting in benefit for an end-user customer. The book focuses on the product developer's central topic of customer needs and product functionality, and product developers in different industries will not have any problem translating Zaltman's suggestions and recommendations into their domains. Perhaps more importantly, they may find reasons to expand their areas of concern to include some of the more strategic issues, such as branding and market communication, addressed here.

Also, the theoretical framework of *How Customers Think* explores assumptions about mind and meaning that are implicit in product developers' familiar voice-of-the-customer (VOC) methodologies. For practitioners in product development who have used VOC methodologies, or who are wondering if and why they work, this book lays out a challenging perspective on how we think, a perspective that is well grounded in cognitive science research of the past several decades.

Zaltman argues that innovators should expand their research tools to tap into what he calls the "unconscious processes" related to consumer decision-making (see, e.g., pp. 57ff). Historically, consumer decision-making has been described as a primarily rational thought process in which consumers consciously evaluate various attributes and the resulting benefits they would receive. More recent understanding of consumer decision-making focuses on primarily unconscious processes that are influenced greatly by the consumer's social and physical context. Zaltman asserts that 95 percent of consumer thinking, including the memories and emotions that lead to behavior, takes place in what he calls the unconscious mind. The consumer is unaware of this thinking and therefore cannot articulate it, and so the kinds of research instruments that only tap into conscious thinking cannot help us to understand this. Even worse for adherents of the school of rational decision-making, consumers use their conscious level of thinking primarily to make sense of their behaviors after the fact, rather than to guide or to control purchases.

Zaltman has developed—and markets—a process he calls the "Metaphor Elicitation Technique," or ZMET, designed to get at deeper levels of meaning, and ways of processing data through techniques such as the one he calls "consensus maps." Fundamentally, he is using a constructivist projective technique that has its

foundation in the field of motivational research from the 1930s and that has been popular in advertising research since the 1970s. There are two cautions in using projective techniques. First, projective techniques help build hypotheses and theories that should be validated by rigorous quantitative research. Unless this is done carefully, projective techniques, built as they are on small samples and qualitative analysis, can fail the tests of validity and reliability. Second, constructivist projective techniques require intellectual and expressive capability among subjects, which can skew the sample and can make it difficult to screen and to recruit subjects. The bottom line for the innovator is that these are powerful but complicated approaches requiring significant understanding, skill, time commitment, and resources to implement effectively.

Readers who are already users of VOC techniques such as the Center for Quality of Management's concept engineering (1997) will recognize the focus on small samples, open-ended interviewing and observation, and inductive data processing. The key, for ZMET as for many of the other VOC processes, is to move beyond what the customer knows or thinks about a product or a situation, and even to move beyond what she or he explicitly feels, into the arena that concept engineering calls "latent needs" and that Zaltman calls "the unconscious."

Zaltman describes ZMET in detail and provides an extended example that explores Hispanics' thoughts and feelings about living in the United States. The "metaphor elicitation stimulus," a photo of a man and a woman, is included in the book. Zaltman provides word for word the "image description probe" that is to be asked by the interviewer, followed by a sample customer response. The example then follows a sequence of introductory probes, followed by examples of effective and ineffective probes, with sample responses. For the ineffective probes, Zaltman explains why the probe is ineffective: "Ineffective Probe: Does this mask hide them from others in America whom they are not like? [This question reflects the interviewer's thinking, not the respondent's thinking]" (p. 103; brackets in original). These examples will be very helpful to innovators who are learning the skills of interviewing. They provide instructions and hints interviewers can use in any open-ended interview situation.

In addition to process examples, Zaltman includes lists of kinds of metaphors, of "human universals," and of archetypes and categories. These can be useful in expanding the familiar and narrow range within which we usually think. For instance, Zaltman describes shopping using the archetype of the journey. "In taking this journey, a consumer may experience numerous archetypal events, such as succumbing to temptation (the hero's fall from grace), confronting a store manager (the power of danger and challenge to build character), overcoming resource constraints (additional character building), and arriving home triumphant (the return of the conquering hero)" (p. 218; parentheses in original).

Zaltman shows us how hearing the experiences of our consumers in such archetypal contexts can open up resources for product and brand imagery that create and connect deeply with customer experience. The many examples will help to suppress skepticism on the part of research and development (R&D), new product development (NPD), and marketing functions; the lists will spur further creative elaboration of our understanding of our customer's world.

Although product development is not as central to Zaltman's thesis as brand and marketing communication, a number of examples do center on successful product development. Through metaphor, Zaltman tells us, "managers can tailor their communications to consumers.... But even more important, they can envision new, more effective ways to respond to those needs through specific products and services" (p. 92). Since metaphors are central to consumers' imagination, "understanding consumers' metaphors enables managers to imagine the nature of consumers' needs with respect to discontinuous innovations outside of consumer experience and beyond the reach of more conventional, literally oriented research tools" (p. 92). But if you already are listening to customer needs using an anthropological approach or if you are collecting the voice of the customer through image maps, then do not feel that "metaphor" is the next best mousetrap. You might use Zaltman's approach as an add-on to what you already are doing. And keep the excellent inductive mapping approaches and the requirements matrices such as those outlined in Brodie and Burchill's (1997) *Voices into Choices*, which help to tie VOC research into the delivery of products and services.

In our experience, it is not necessary that marketers and product developers understand the theory behind Zaltman's recommendations—it is enough that they practice them. Firms do not need, as he suggests, "insights from several disciplines about how the mind works" (pp. 21–22). Fascinating as it might be, understanding how the mind works is the job of academia. The product developer's job is to practice the kind of deep inquiry recommended by Zaltman and others and to learn to process the insights gained and to use them to develop and to market products.