

JOHN COLDWELL reports back from a vibrant workshop, following a multi-national customer research survey.

Low-hanging fruit . . .

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The old saying that the Chinese and the Japanese don't like to 'lose face' was brought home to me recently when I ran a workshop in Shanghai.

My client was Manitowoc, the world's largest manufacturer of cranes.

Two days earlier I'd run a similar session in Singapore, and the executive vice-president had said the Shanghai session had to be run in both English and Chinese.

However, only five minutes after we'd started the double-headed, dual-language exercise with 16 senior managers in a smallish room on the 28th floor of one of the thousands of skyscrapers that make up this 21st century

Gotham City look-alike, we were asked: "Can't we just do it in English?" I won't tell the EVP if you don't, I said to Jim Cui, who had been doing the simultaneous translation.

And so, for the rest of the day, English it was.

I had been contacted by their American VP of

marketing about six months previously. He had called out of the blue, saying that he'd

been tasked with organising a worldwide customer satisfaction survey and he'd been told I could help him.

There followed nine weeks of conference calls, every Tuesday at 1pm my time, with Manitowoc's marketing people in the US, France and China.

Together they chose the questions they wanted to ask, and compiled a list of their most important customers to be included in the survey.

They happily bought into the idea that the *raison d'etre* for all our surveys is 'To increase profitable sales'. And, once the survey was completed, they arranged for me to facilitate the full-day workshops in Singapore, Shanghai, Lyons, Shady Grove and Manitowoc.

Customer feedback

The format of the day is pretty much standard throughout our organisation (we even have a nine-page operating procedure for these post-survey workshops).

The first hour is spent taking everyone through the report, showing them where to find the information but not putting too much spin or interpretation on the data (for this you need to start off with a fairly clear, unambiguous report otherwise you lose your audience for the rest of the day).

The group is then split into small teams (I've found teams of three are more dynamic than teams of four, but I've no idea why) with the brief of going through the customer feedback, in detail, and coming back to the session in the early afternoon with a minimum of 20 ideas to help the client achieve that all-important *raison d'etre*.

(One of the fun things

about running these international workshops is anticipating what will be provided for the working lunch!

It is always excellent food, very well presented, with wine when in France. I've been offered milk in the Netherlands and beer in Stockholm, but it's not always stereotypical. The last time I was in Atlanta, in the American Deep South, everyone was eating the healthiest possible chicken salads. In Shanghai, the wait was almost unbearable.

Could it possibly be dim sum, or lemon chicken with rice, or even sweet and sour? There was a knock on the door and there stood the delivery boy, arms outstretched, carrying a stack of Pizza Hut boxes!

I digress.

Because of the way we work, there are some unusual aspects to our reports.

We only work in B2B and, as a result, feel our clients need to know 'who said what', so we attribute all of the responses.

This has the effect of highlighting not only low-hanging fruit, where there is the opportunity to gain more of the share of wallet of satisfied customers, but also the odd personality clash between key account manager and customer.

(Would the account manager know there was a personality clash that was damaging the business relationship and, if they did, would they admit it to their boss?)

Another unusual aspect is our exceptionally high response rate, which, since 1989, has averaged between 70 and 75 per cent. The value of this in the B2B world is that our clients don't have to worry about statistical validity - they simply



and pizzas in Shanghai

choose their most important customers and we do the rest.

In the afternoon, the teams present ('sell') their ideas back to the main group, and afterwards these ideas get scored on a simple cost/benefit matrix so as to prioritise the 100+ suggestions.

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How wrong he was!

It was something to do with using English that acted as a leveller - that afternoon was one of the noisiest, most vibrant sessions I've ever seen.

There was no sense of hierarchy, no sense of staying quiet out of respect for one's elders - everyone and everything was fair game that afternoon.

Power of the workshop

But it was only when I was flying back to the UK, somewhere between making a wet patch on my pillow (I blame the remarkably comfortable flat bed for that) and the turbulence from passing over the Urals (looking out of the window you could see the enormity of the mountain

range and understand why it separates Asia from Europe) that I realised the true power of the workshop.

One of the teams had presented the idea of offering 24-hour telephone sales (yes, it could only happen in Shanghai!). Not sales support, not service, but full-on sales, 24/7.

They argued there were at least 30 people capable of selling a tower-crane over the phone, which meant it was only one night a month that each person would be taking calls.

And they argued the case very well.

What dawned on me on the flight home was, if I or any other outsider had suggested that idea it would probably have been met with the response 'that will be difficult' (it is notoriously difficult to get the Oriental to be so impolite as to give an outright 'no').

But, because they'd suggested it themselves, they'd have to make it work.

And so it was, a couple of weeks later, when we'd completed all the workshops, that we ended up presenting to the company president.

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Now, many years ago I learned that senior managers don't like to hear about problems, they prefer solutions, and that has continued with me.

In the hour-long slot we took the president through the worldwide report, segmented into his three geographic regions. We showed him the individual responses and examples of low-hanging fruit and personality clashes.

But the finale was the five prioritised action plans that had come from the five workshops - hundreds of ideas from his own people.

All based on a simple customer satisfaction survey.

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