

### How to Organize a VOC Road Trip

By Chris Parks

#### Situation

We were struggling with a DSP control system product family for our professional audio components that just seemed to never be able to find it's wings. The DSP system had some genuine advantages versus many of the competitive offerings and we had recently announced a few key features that might have been holding back sales over the past few years. Even considering the missing features, we really didn't understand the "why" of sluggish sales through our installer distributor channel, at least for a subset of applications. The product had enjoyed some success during the build out of large cinemas and sport stadium venues in the late 90's, but was not really participating in the growth markets of the new century such as casinos and houses of worship. We decided to put a formal project in place to understand where our control system was positioned versus the competition and to determine what we could do to increase sales.

#### How Technology Marketing Course Concepts Apply

One thing I remember well from the course, "getting to why..." Getting to why requires talking to the Opinion Leaders, and that in and of itself can pose a major challenge. Going out to talk to opinion leaders sounds simple, but in fact management has in the past pushed to rely on any useable information that might be immediately at hand. In this case, however, company management appointed a cross-functional team from sales, engineering, and marketing to execute a disciplined Voice of the Customer interaction process. Company management was determined to gain the most impact possible from customer feedback, and to put plans in place, once and for all, to improve DSP control system success.

#### Strategy

The team agreed that opinion leader input was crucial, but that meant we had to agree on which customers actually qualified as opinion leaders. First, we asked Sales to identify which dealer installers bought the most product from the company overall, and whether those purchases were fewer large orders or frequent smaller orders.

This was a good exercise to see our sweet spot, but it didn't make us feel we had identified market opinion leaders. Our next step was to ask ourselves about communities of influence, and which market segments might contain opinion leaders.

We developed the following installed professional audio segmentation matrix for use in market interview sample selection:

Community/ Venue:	Churches	Casinos	Theme Parks	Retail/ Hospitality	Schools	Corporate	Rental
Audio Application:							
Performance							
Presentation							
Distributed							

Installer dealers sometimes specialize by venue, but many others sell to multiple end customer types. The other challenge with opinion leader identification in our market was the sheer number of independent audio consultants, in addition to a large network of relatively small installer dealers across the U.S. To keep the sample size manageable the team decided to prioritize venue segments by looking at market size, growth rate, fit to our feature set and breadth of applications represented in the segment. The decision was made to focus on the Church audio system market.

Narrowing the target market to Churches still produced an Excel sheet with in excess of 75 names. To further simplify the market research task I held an impromptu meeting with the Sales team and asked, "Which of these are the stars of the industry who best run their business and are generally respected and idealized players." This helped to get the list down to a manageable size.

We identified one installer and one consultant opinion leader by region using the following criteria:

	Opinion Leader Name	% of Business in Churches	Share of Church Market	Orientation to DSP Technology
Midwest				
Western				
Northwest				
Southwest				
Southeast				
Eastern				

### Tactics

With our sampling strategy agreed upon it was time to set up the target interviews and get our cross-functional team prepared to conduct the meetings. Getting the meetings set up was not a problem because the target installer dealers were aware of, and supportive of, our brand even if they were not current DSP control system customers.

Once we established the interview schedule, the next step was to develop a discussion guide for the meetings. Let me start off by saying that nearly everyone has an idea of what they would like to ask a customer if they only had a chance, but we wanted to stay focused on gaining competitive advantage, so our goal was to tie current solutions and new product development to customer business problems. Keeping the discussion topics focused took discipline. Wait. Let me rephrase: it took a great deal of discipline. The team decided to focus our questions in 3 areas:

- Dealer installer (or consultant) business and market trends, objectives and success metrics
- Dealer installer (or consultant) operations, defining how DSP system suppliers effect cycle time or cost in each business process
- Trends in end customer (church) audio requirements, and the implications for DSP system architecture

We got our cross-functional team together, reviewed the basic precepts of VOC, and reaffirmed what we were trying to accomplish through the process. We discussed meeting roles of the moderator, the note-taker, and the observer(s) and drove home the point that everyone would be asked to participate in formalizing the notes as soon as possible after each meeting – we decided to rotate the roles for each customer so that the note-taker workload was reasonable for all.

### Results

Most importantly, company management and marketing were very pleased to find that the more disciplined and rigorous we were in gathering customer needs input, the more trusting the engineering community was in accepting the results of the market research. Because of participation and buy-in from our technical team we were able to quickly prioritize new product feature development, and to resolve long standing debates about next generation system architecture.

One of the best unanticipated results of our customer interview meetings was the immediate increase in DSP system business we saw from the opinion leader installer dealers. Like watering a plant, the mere fact that a senior cross-functional team had traveled to the field with the sole purpose of listening and understanding problems, had an immediate positive effect on the mindshare we received in these accounts.

In the professional audio industry we were fortunate to find a few key opinion leaders who were able not only to articulate their requirements and desires, but were able to help us see why they make their business decisions. We used this insight to prioritize target markets for longer term product strategy – and the DSP system product family has been steadily gaining market share.

### Lessons Learned

One thing in particular I now insist upon is that only people who have made the commitment to come to all the customer meetings are allowed to summarize learning. The problem is that if someone comes to one meeting, they are convinced they understand the market based on an incomplete view. This rule is to ensure that consensus is achieved amongst the group. If someone comes to one meeting, they might miss the nugget that makes it all make sense. Then when you go to summarize, they do not agree at all with the group. This is counterproductive. I have asked our company VP's not to join us unless they were willing to be a part of the team all the way through. In every case, this discipline has made our summaries powerful and actionable.