



**WHY STEVE JOBS
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It's not about pop culture, and it's not about fooling people, and it's not about convincing people that they want something they don't. We figure out what we want. And I think we're pretty good at having the right discipline to think through whether a lot of other people are going to want it, too.

We do no market research. We don't hire consultants. We just want to design and develop and bring to market great products. We trust as a consequence of that, people will like them, and as another consequence we'll make some money. But we're really clear about what our goals are.

Steve Jobs
Apple

Steve Jobs famously didn't pay too much attention to customer research. And yet – or should that be because of – this refusal to pay much attention to what customers say they want, Apple has become the ultimate game changer and one of the most loved brands on the planet.

Jobs' determination to carve his own path to innovation is an example of why you need to be bold to win in business today. And that includes how you listen to customers.

The customers least likely to help you move on to the next innovation are often the biggest customers you have. For B2B suppliers, those large accounts who generate most of your revenue today are those whose views you pay most attention to. Yet ask them what they want and it is likely to be the usual thing – better, faster, but mostly cheaper. They want a better deal on what they've already got.

Gary Hamel, one of the leading thinkers on business innovation, once said that the future is already with us, it's just at the edges. What starts off as fringe ends up mainstream. (Think about the impact that digital cameras had on Kodak or Netflix had on Blockbuster). So, if you are going to listen to customers you may want to start with those noisy, complaining, fringe customers who are always asking for something completely different to what you are currently offering... providing of course they really are your target customers.

Customer innovation is not about 'forward-looking', it's 'different-looking'. Hamel argues that the most innovative companies, like Apple, are not the most forward-looking. This, as an approach to customer innovation misses the point.

Jobs was adept at seeing under the surface of what customers want; they just don't realise it until they see it. Nobody needed an iPad until they saw one.

This ability is best expressed by the German word 'zeitgeist' – the emerging spirit of the age or mood of the moment. It probably best translates as market readiness or customer readiness. People like Jobs see what the market is ready for before the market knows it itself. This was best summed up by his mantra 'Think Differently.'

In aiming to craft a distinctive, unique customer experience you need to follow the same approach – look for the unspoken needs, not just what existing customers are already asking for, or what existing competitors are doing. That way lies competitive convergence. Or sameness. In short, mediocrity.

Yes, you need 'Voice of the Customer' programmes, but these need to be used to tell you what frustrates customers or how their lives are changing or what they experience within other sectors. But, what your customers say they want from you is probably exactly the same thing they tell your competitors too – and so if you act on that alone, there is likely to be more in common between you and your competitors than there is that sets you apart.

Your job is to interpret what they say and innovate a new product or service that delivers value that the customers did not know they needed.

Customers love it when you surprise them – in a good way of course. And to surprise and delight someone, you don't ask them "What can we do to surprise and delight you?" That's an oxymoron. It's a bit like asking your partner what you need to do to be romantic on Valentine's day. It somehow doesn't work.