How Ag Experts Can Strengthen the B2B Customer Experience with Market Research

AgAccess

Research shows that it is five times more expensive for companies to attract a new customer than to retain a current one.

This underscores the smart business focus on maintaining great relationships with existing clients. But, in order to know how to engage meaningfully with existing clients and continually improve the customer experience, brands need to be in sync with customer attitudes, behaviors, preferences and more. Proper market research that brings the voice of the customer to the table allows brands to maximize ROI and mitigate business risk.

Business to Business (B2B) brands need confidence in their approach to customer experience (CX) research. Manufacturers and service providers in the agricultural industry need more niche data that can only be delivered from specific respondents and focused studies. Each project needs to work together as a part of a bigger strategy to provide accurate and actionable insights to make decisions for positive business impact.

With years of experience in this niche field, we've put together a guide to help Ag experts, consultants and research analysts get the most from their efforts and help the clients they serve win the day with brand loyalty.

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The Case for Business-to-Business (B2B) Customer Experience (CX) Research

The agriculture industry is a dynamic and rapidly evolving space.

To succeed, Ag businesses must align their offerings with customer needs even as those needs are changing mid-season, during product launches, or as new attitudes and behaviors are being adopted. Not only is the Ag industry in flux, but B2B sales also involve a uniquely complex buyer's journey compared to a traditional consumer-focused sales path. Decision making in the Ag world involves a limited target audience and, depending on the size of the operation, a layered approval process unlike any other industry.

Additionally, a typical Ag client represents a greater portion of a company's revenue versus a general consumer client, increasing the impact of the client relationship. These reasons underscore the need for Ag businesses to take a serious approach to fully understanding their B2B customer experience through on-going brand tracking and often additional iterative research.

What is B2B CX Research?

For B2B business, some experts feel customer experience (CX) should be considered the 5th P in the marketing mix: **perception**. Understanding and addressing perceptions throughout the customer experience may prove more valuable to a company's success than the other 4P's: **product**, **price**, **promotion**, or **place**. In a world where a company's competitive advantage may be almost exclusively predicated on creating, safeguarding, and enhancing customer perceptions, getting direct access to insights from these highly valuable customers is imperative.

CX research focuses on the comprehensive experience of the user throughout their buyer journey. From initial awareness of their need, through every aspect of consideration and final decision about a product or service, many methodologies can be used to capture meaningful data and insight which can be leveraged to improve that experience for the same consumer, or potential future clients.

Why Conduct B2B CX Research in the Ag Industry?

Agricultural market research traditionally focused on product and price, but this focus on customer experience is now table stakes for success. It is imperative to gather consumer behavior in order to make pointed and often high-dollar decisions regarding brand messaging, positioning and assessing market opportunity. With high acquisition costs and few opportunities to impress a potential B2B customer, mitigating the risk of losing a client is great. Instead of guessing why customers renew services or speculating on the path to winning a profitable new customer, quality B2B customer experience research provides precise strategic insights to increase renewal opportunities and ensure prospects are properly served throughout the buyer's journey.

1. Retain and Strengthen Existing Customer Relationships

The value of a repeat customer is great, yet companies frequently spend valuable time and resources identifying and securing new customers at the expense of existing customer relationships. Bolstering existing customer relationships should be a critical component of the business strategy. B2B CX can uncover insights that retain and strengthen client relationships and lower customer churn rate.

B2B customer experience studies focus on the following questions:

Why work with our brand?
Answers lead to the development of better marketing messages, highlighting key differentiation factors.

What makes key customers unique?
Identify the defining characteristics of loyal customers to help target the right customer profile for future growth.

What is important to customers?
Align resources with strategies that will strengthen offerings.

What aspects drive loyalty?
Continuous assessment is vital for maintaining relevance as consumer opinion, experience and behavior is constantly in flux.

What are our strengths and weaknesses?
A SWOT analysis focuses on resource distribution to increase ROI.

2. Identify and Win Profitable Future Customers

After securing current customer satisfaction and enhancing brand perception, businesses may widen the focus and actively search for ways to obtain new, profitable customers. With many avenues for competitors to reach prospective clients, perception is crucial for winning new business with less marketing waste. As the Ag industry operates largely with many consumers in remote environments, personal relationships span many miles. Reaching potential future customers requires a digital approach. With limited personal contacts, companies have a smaller margin of error for cutting through the noise to get their messaging noticed. Marketing research enables businesses to zero in on what matters to these potential prospects with highly relevant messages to take advantage of these limited opportunities.

B2B customer experience research for new or lost relationships focuses on the following questions:

What did we get wrong with past campaigns?

All companies should identify and learn from past mistakes.

Where do current suppliers add value? (Or do they?)

Identify especially powerful partnerships and potential collaborations to drive perceived added value.

Which competitors are winning the market share?

Review threats posed by competitors' strengths and evaluate potential opportunities from their weaknesses.

How do we successfully target future relationships?

Opinions can reveal potential customer segments that cannot be satisfied with current business offerings. These insights can lead to innovation pipelines and the development of new products.

Components of a B2B CX Research Plan

What is the Structure of the Research Project?
To create a comprehensive and meaningful B2B customer experience research project, researchers must design studies with questions that prompt respondents to shed light on **five key areas**:

1. Business Context
Research enables businesses to probe external forces that may be affecting the customer's business situation and experiences. By examining current issues, industry factors, and economic forces, enterprises gain a conceptual understanding of the marketplace that adds nuance to the bigger picture.

2. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
KPIs include metrics such as Likelihood to Recommend, Net Promoter Score (NPS), Overall Satisfaction (OSAT), Likelihood to Consider, and Overall Value Delivered. These insights are customizable by company and industry and directly reflect the unique ways customers interact with certain products and services. They are concrete external metrics of overall success, and they offer the possibility to tie back to internal success metrics such as revenue growth and churn reduction.

Adhering to best practices when designing the structure of the research questions is key to the project success.

3. Unaided Strengths and Weaknesses
Asking open-ended questions generates unbiased answers about why customers work with a business and how they exceed or fail to meet expectations. Often this data aligns with drivers of satisfaction (see below) while revealing relationship nuances that are top of mind for customers.

4. Drivers of Customer Satisfaction
Using a list of 10-15 attributes, customers are asked to rate their level of satisfaction with various company offerings (including products, services, and personnel). The data gleaned uncovers the detailed components of the offering that drive and detract from measurable brand performance.

5. Review and Data Sorting
The open-ended portion of market research can expose any additional issues affecting the company and industry. Reviewing these customer-prompted comments uncovers unspoken needs and creates new topics for consideration for future research projects, ideation or innovation projects. In this way, the study can assess the current environment and lay the groundwork for identifying and addressing future needs.

How Ag Access Analyzes Data to Meet Business Objectives

Analysis brings businesses the insight necessary to grow, actualizing the worth of solid research. When dealing specifically with B2B CX research, an accurate measure of customer satisfaction can provide the essential information to identify areas of excellence and areas for improvement.

The expert team at Ag Access uses a variety of advanced statistical measures to ensure the data provide meaningful insights for business impact, including:

Quadrant Analysis

(via a two-dimensional map of key drivers, latent motivators, price of entry, and other attributes)

This is an important tool to compare stated/derived importance to company performance.

Derived Importance

(via Correlation and Regression Analysis)

This is used to effectively explore the relationship between detailed attributes and KPIs.

Customer Sub-Segment Analysis

This examines hidden nuances within the "overall customer" view. It further explores characteristics of mutually exclusive customer segments that the business has pre-defined or segments which have emerged from the research itself.

Research Project Best Practices

With the availability and easy-access of self-serve and DIY research tools available such as SurveyMonkey (now Momentive) and Google Forms, many companies run into trouble thinking they can produce the same quality of information as a professionally-designed survey for a fraction of the cost. However, there is much more to the market research process than asking simple questions over the web without sophisticated systems for respondent qualification or verification.

Thriving companies look to seasoned market research professionals to provide invaluable customer, product and market assessments. Proper research knowledge includes identifying the relevant business problem(s) to be solved, determining the optimal research design, preparing instruments and methods (which frequently include a mix of online and offline approaches), recruiting respondents, sampling data, collecting data, ensuring data quality and reliability, analysis, reporting, and recommendations based on insights uncovered, and more.

When serious business decisions are predicated on research outcomes, A DIY form builder is not suitable for the task. With the revenue impact at risk, errors in the B2B marketplace are far more costly than professional research. Employing a professional research team ensures questions and scales are accurate and actionable. It reduces the likelihood of bias in the study and the resulting data. Lastly, it offers an objective, third-party view of the current situation.

How to Begin

An excellent place to start thinking about a research project is with a reputable market research company. An in-depth discussion can help flesh out business objectives and uncover the triggers that prompted the need for CX examination. This conversation establishes a clear purpose for research.

Think of it like a trip — it's easier to budget and complete the journey when working with an intended destination in mind and a map for guidance.

A research plan is a map to success.

A solid research plan outlines a growth path, determining what project managers and field directors need to know and how they will share information with stakeholders. When properly created, it highlights internal and external areas for alignment and sets standards and milestones for short-term and long-term success.

Too often, companies who start a project themselves run out of steam (be it money, know-how, or stamina) before they can put their data to good use. Working with a research company from the beginning brings the end of the project into focus. It designs and forces post-research action which is imperative to drive measured business impact, results, and ultimately, increased revenue.

Who to Survey

Choosing audiences and sourcing contacts to use for a project is critical to success. There are many types of customers to consider, including existing, lost/previous, lapsed, prospective, etc. Each audience provides opportunities to measure performance, benchmark the industry, and add context in different ways and with differing perspectives. The true value and the ultimate decision regarding research respondents specifications should be tied directly to the stated research objectives.

Once the qualifications required for research participants are identified, sourcing those respondents can be a complicated facet of the project in and of itself. Sample sourcing may include additional screening for individuals in **survey panel databases**, media mailing lists, industry directories and more.

A few considerations related to sourcing include:

A Customer and Prospect List
A customer list has value, and with the proper security measures, researchers can use them to elicit business-specific feedback.

A Relevant and Realistic Sample
Many companies lack extensive databases or have small customer lists. Skilled market research recruiters know the size of the sample is not directly related to the reliability. Sourcing highly qualified research participants is a combination of art and science. With proper segmentation and screener standards, a relatively small sample can deliver a representative sample to deliver statistical significance.

Customer Segments
All customers are not created equally. According to industry or line of business, each type of customer has its own distinct needs and its own attributes. These customer profiles can be vastly different. For instance, some customer groups may be large or in a specific region. Some may manage large budgets. Sometimes customer needs and their attributes overlap. Proper customer segmentation is key to properly determine the appropriate targets to fill the respondent pool.

What Methods to Use

Organizations should use a mix of qualitative and quantitative research during B2B CX research for a holistic view of the customer experience. Many methodologies can be used within these two approaches, but regardless of methodologies, the most important consideration is meeting customers in their most natural environment to increase the likelihood their responses are accurate representations of their true opinion, experiences and behaviors.

What follows is a quick overview of how our team at Ag Access uses different methodologies with each of the qualitative and quantitative phases in any B2B customer experience research project.

Qualitative Phase

Often a prerequisite for quantitative research design, the qualitative phase is more exploratory in nature. Focus groups, telephone interviews, in-depth interviews (IDIs) and other methodologies explore the experiences that build customer loyalty and attempts to uncover root causes, hidden perceptions or frameworks from the perspective of the participants. It is an approach that seeks to maintain an open mind, open dialogue and open framework for the upcoming research. Instead of assuming what is driving KPIs, different methodologies seek to discover what topics and focuses of the research will be most relevant as a foundation for building a study.

At Ag Access, we may conduct one to four telephone interviews with the sponsoring company's senior leaders to gain an internal perspective on the current business conditions and marketing efforts, understand the customer segments and needs, and experience the language and idiosyncrasies of the business.

Typically, we then move on to telephone interviews (lasting 30-45 minutes each) with client contacts. We discuss the various touch points they have experienced with the sponsoring company and the motivations behind their partnership. These are done without leading the respondents so as to uncover previously hidden perspectives and issues.

As the focus begins to narrow, we may identify key influencers and explore specifics around identified issues. We may probe client perception of business strengths and weaknesses, and that of their competitors, using the sum of their experiences to inform decisions we make during the quantitative phase of the project.

Regardless of the scope, methods or size of this phase, the intention is to ensure the right topics, questions and issues are addressed in the next step of the study.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase is structured based on qualitative discovery. The goal of this phase is to ultimately provide statistically significant data to more clearly define and understand the consumer experience, their opinions, behaviors, motivations, perceptions and more, within a measurable context. For this reason, we rely on survey questions that use numeric and worded scales to differentiate customer segments and attributes. We focus on the five key components of the B2B customer experience:

- Business context
- KPIs
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Drivers of satisfaction
- Review and sorting of data

We work to ensure the question terminology, question framing, and metric selection for these fit both the company, as well as the clients.

While typically driven by short responses, this research phase should still include some open-ended questions to gauge high-level, top-of-mind information. This data can be valuable when a customer is passionate about a topic, but care should be taken to keep questions as specific, focused, and clear as possible.

The Ag Access Difference

A successful B2B customer experience research project can provide the foundation for transformative touchpoints that foster customer acquisition, buy-in, and satisfaction. At Ag Access we are uniquely equipped to bring a wide range of expertise to B2B CX research projects for agriculture clients. [For over 25 years](), we've helped Ag businesses capture perceptions of their varied stakeholders to inform specific business objectives.

When you need a trusted partner with experience in agriculture research, Ag Access is your insights ally.

Ag Access is a research logistics company serving insights professionals and strategic consultants in the agriculture and animal health industry who use research to inform critical business decisions.

With over two decades of experience conducting studies in the agriculture space, we offer audience access, questionnaire design, project management, data collection, and custom logistics plans to help drive your business forward. Our proven process brings clarity to the execution of market research studies from initial strategy through recruiting and final delivery of outcomes.

Learn more about our quantitative and qualitative research packages today on **our website**, or contact us at **info@ag-access.com** for more information.