



10 tips for conducting better product research with clinicians

| By Joe Kalinowski

So maybe you're the second coming of Steve Jobs. You know what consumers will need, even though they don't know they'll need it. However, that approach to new-product definition is very rarely successful. In fact, Jobs is now known to have done extensive market research with consumers before going to market. Likewise, you need to somehow discover what consumers want (i.e., what will sell).

Let's talk about new medical products, especially those personally used by clinicians - physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners and physician assistants - to treat patients. How does a supplier of such products, generally characterized as medical devices, determine what to develop and bring to market?

The simplest answer to the question is: "Ask the clinicians what they need." Unfortunately, it ain't that easy! Here are 10 proven guidelines to follow to reach a more satisfying answer to the question.

Put the patient first. This goes without saying, right? Perhaps, but you do need to establish with certainty that the wellbeing of some patient class will be improved and/or their medical risks mitigated when the product is applied by a clinician.

Just ask. A good place to start. Determine who the likely users are and ask them what they want. But who is the predominant user and who is the predominant purchase influencer? They may or may not be the same person. And you cannot simply ask, "What do you need?" They may not know what they

need and they almost certainly do not know what can be delivered. But they do know precisely what job they have to do. Find that out and endeavor to make that job easier, increase their compensation or both.

Just watch. What could be better than watching the targeted clinician perform that job? Nothing. Be there. Make yourself invisible and learn. Watch especially for hang-ups, uncomfortable moments, complaints, time-consuming steps and error-prone activities. After a procedure is done, ask what they found easy and difficult. Then go to work fixing the difficult steps.

Remember the clinician is a person. This reality is all too easy to forget. They generally don't respond only to logical arguments and fancy new products. They know what is - and what is not - in their comfort zone. They also respond emotionally, just like you. Your solution cannot be too unfamiliar or too complex. Perhaps it's just the wrong color! Perhaps it will simply take too long to learn. Or maybe they cannot imagine pitching your solution to the purchasing powers that be. Be prepared to react to the inevitable emotional responses. Maybe a focus group or three will do the trick.

Gather from a diverse group. Since clinicians are people, they are all different. Be sure you are covering the territory: thought leaders, early adopters, late adopters, dedicated practitioners of the art, old hands, newcomers and everyone in between. You must ultimately sell to all so it would be prudent to hear a variety of views.

Push your developers into the field. Encourage - force, if necessary - your scientists and engineers to visit health care workplaces and the clinicians who work there. Let them really get the feel of the place, the stress, the disorganization, the interruptions, the distractions and resulting errors and delays. Observing any prospective product's environment of use will surely spur important questions and creativity.

Ask when you have something to ask about. Think, "What do you think of this product concept or that product benefit and why?" Not, "What would you like to have?" Give clinicians something concrete to ponder - something they can imagine in their workplace. Later in the process, expose them to a reasonably accurate concept model. You do engage the services of human factors experts and industrial designers, right?

Consider asking patients. Self-treatment devices are becoming ever more common. In those cases, it's imperative to get patient opinions and design guidance as well. The more intimate and intrusive the device, the more critical the patient input.

Guard your secrets. You may not much care if your competitors learn that you're conducting market research in an obvious, familiar space. But if you're up to something very different, know that your competitors will inevitably find out. Consider third-party support for your research.

Share the wealth smartly. Don't overlook the critical importance of sharing the knowledge that you develop with your in-house team - not just the raw data but some carefully-crafted conclusions, the analysis behind those conclusions and the resulting influences on your internal development plans and budgets. Whether your research efforts are conducted by in-house staff or a consulting partner, its results must be widely shared, uniformly understood and acted upon effectively throughout your organization. 

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