



LISTENING TO THE CUSTOMER'S VOICE: CINDY TRISH

The dynamic new leader of Knowledge Networks' Boston-area office is keenly focused on learning and meeting client needs

Cindy Trish recently joined Knowledge Networks as head of its Needham, Massachusetts, office. With nearly thirty years' experience in marketing insights, she has helped a wide variety of high-profile clients obtain the insights they need to inform key marketing decisions, from product development to investor relations. For ten years Trish headed up her own California-based insights business, Trish Information Services; and she spent five years at Research International, most recently as Executive Vice President. In 2002, she left the "mainland" to learn the consumer retail business first-hand as General Manager of the "premier wine shop located on Martha's Vineyard," with twenty-plus employees serving tourists and "year-rounders" alike.

YOU TOOK AN UNUSUAL STEP WHEN YOU PUT YOUR CORPORATE CAREER ON HOLD TO MANAGE A SMALL, PRIVATELY OWNED BUSINESS. TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THIS CHANGE OF SCENE.

It was a lifestyle opportunity that I essentially created for myself. There is a tremendous allure to an island that is, by necessity, economically and socially self-sufficient and sustained by a tight-knit, supportive community. I wanted to understand how the island economy functioned and what kind of career I could carve out there given my experiences and interest. The business cycle of the island is extremely compressed, as with many tourist economies—more than 50 percent of our sales were made in four short months. Combined with the challenges of

purchasing, shipping, and storing products in a space-constrained retail setting, there were many logistical and marketing challenges! My goal was to contribute to the success of a year-round locally owned business, as well as be a good neighbor and citizen, and I think I succeeded.

DID YOU SEE WAYS IN WHICH THE ISLAND COMMUNITY IS A MICROCOSM OF THE CONSUMER WORLD AT LARGE?

I did! It's almost a controlled environment, so it's very interesting and attractive from an analytical perspective. For example, businesses on the island traditionally supported each other; it was understood that if I purchased my office supplies from Mike—a private business—Mike and his family would purchase their wine from me. For 90 percent of the island's history, it was an implicit barter economy. But in the last fifteen or twenty years, consumers have had

WE HAVE TO BALANCE EXCELLENCE ACROSS ALL STAGES OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS; ACHIEVING THE OPTIMAL MIX MEANS UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS RELEVANT TO EACH CUSTOMER.

a growing desire for more and better things—things to drive and play with, from electronics to furniture. So we have seen more and more islanders, especially those who live here year-round, going off-island and purchasing

products at lower costs. In addition, seasonal workers from other countries are not spending locally, as had happened in the past. Overall, this migration from small private retail businesses to chain discounters is a big issue for the island economically—as it has been for communities throughout the U.S.

SO WHAT ATTRACTED YOU BACK TO THE MAINLAND—AND TO KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS?

I've been observing Knowledge Networks in the marketplace for years, and I've always felt that its value proposition was special. In the last twenty-five years, our industry has experienced increasing difficulty in reaching and talking to consumers—from both a research perspective and a marketing one. The effort, time, and cost associated with developing insights that you can “hang your hat on” has also been growing; and while conventional Internet research has offered a low-cost alternative, clients are recognizing that the quality, the service, and the attention to their special business issues has been lost.

Knowledge Networks really owns that unique niche in which you achieve the best of both worlds—the convenience and speed of the Internet, and the quality and service of premium research. I couldn't find that anywhere else, and I can't wait to bring this capability to the attention of people who may not have heard about it yet.

YOU MENTIONED THE NEED TO RECOGNIZE A CUSTOMER'S BUSINESS ISSUES—COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THAT A LITTLE MORE?

I have always had a real passion for representing the voice of the customer—being able to create something actionable within that voice that will build business or add real value.

Whether you're talking about market intelligence folks at a major corporation, who are responding to the needs of a variety of functional groups within their organization, or a soccer mom looking for the right bottle of Merlot—your goal as a service provider is to identify what that customer is about and help her find exactly what she needs. You have to understand how they see the world, how they process, how they communicate their satisfaction, and how they perceive their relationship with the companies they share their dollars with.

One of the first things I did as General Manager at Vineyard Markets was to segment the customer base. I found that customers were basically divided into seven groups, each with very particular goals and needs. One segment is “Daytrippers”—people who come to a tourist community for a single day. They're going to spend their dollars on transportation, on t-shirts, on ice-cream cones, on renting bicycles. What do you want to stock to appeal to that customer? And, looking at it with the retailer's eyes, how much effort do you want to expend trying to appeal to that group? I found that, in some cases, the store was working too hard to please less-profitable customer segments with relatively little growth potential.

So it's all about seeing the customer's perspective fully; there is no substitute for that.

THINKING ABOUT ALL OF YOUR BUSINESS EXPERIENCE, GIVE YOUR FEELINGS ON EXCELLENCE. WHAT CONSTITUTES EXCELLENCE, AND WHAT IS ITS REAL VALUE?

I still think it comes down to the voice of the customer—how they have defined their needs. How many times have we been in a situation where an “excellent” deliverable chock full of insight missed the customer's deadline? Time-sensitive decisions needed to be made about investments in manufacturing plants or marketing programs—and the necessary information was still “on the way.” To me, that's not excellence in terms of the beholder.

From a market-research perspective, if there is not quality in all aspects in the development of insights—in the survey design and collection of the data, in the analysis and all of the logistics, as well as the timeliness—the value of the insights can be greatly diminished. This is an industry that requires suppliers to balance excellence across all stages of the process; achieving the optimal mix means understanding what is relevant to each customer.

THINKING AGAIN ABOUT THE ISLAND ECONOMY—CLEARLY THE SMALL STORES THERE CANNOT COMPETE WITH THE MAINLAND ON PRICE. HOW DO YOU CREATE A SITUATION WHERE PRICE IS NOT THE ONLY DECIDING FACTOR IN A PURCHASE DECISION? HOW DO YOU WIN CUSTOMERS IN SPITE OF A PRICE OBSTACLE?



It's about developing relationships through listening and engaging. You're basically conducting research 100 percent of the time. Soon after I started my job, I went and talked to the innkeepers about what services they were trying to provide and the needs of their customers. I went to the kitchens of the restaurants and looked at what they were purchasing in terms of ports and wines and made some recommendations to help them reduce their costs. It's about applying discipline to the process of understanding what people's needs are.

I also believe you have to take responsibility for educating your customers in all the elements that go into making an accurate price comparison. People often

make decisions on apples-to-oranges comparisons, without valuing or understanding the cost of obtaining the product, personal time involved, and quality issues. You need to communicate your value proposition clearly and help the customer make the right decision for them—even if you are not always the winner.

SPEAKING OF KNOWING YOUR CUSTOMERS—WE SEEM TO BE ENTERING AN ERA WHEN THE AMOUNT OF DATA AVAILABLE ABOUT CONSUMERS IS, IN SOME RESPECTS, UNLIMITED. HOW DO YOU HELP CLIENTS SIFT THROUGH WHAT THEY ALREADY HAVE AT THEIR FINGERTIPS TO HELP SPIN THAT DATA INTO DECISIONS?

There might be more information available today, but I'm not convinced that we necessarily have the right information. In some ways, we may know our customers better, and in other ways, we may be further removed than ever.

CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

I think we need to understand the growing complexity of how people make decisions. Customers have many more options—how they purchase things, from whom they purchase; the world is a much more global place. So it's not just about better presentation or better distillation; we need to broaden the insights we can provide based on the evolution in decision making.

There's also an increasing desire to understand the impact of decisions on business. It's not enough to say the awareness of a particular advertising campaign is X percent; most results-oriented professionals want to know the impact on sales and whether or not there has been an adequate return on investment. Do the traditional measures represent what it is that companies need to know about the decision-making process and the factors that are influencing customers? There's more complexity in the information that needs to be collected, and there's more distillation and complexity required for analyses that deliver usable insights that can drive business decisions.

Twenty-five years ago, it was much easier to "know your customer." There weren't as many customer segments; the companies themselves were not as complex; product lines were more static; and technology

wasn't moving half as quickly. All of these changes have upped the ante—and, at the same time, clients need answers in a bigger hurry. This requires constant proactivity; and something like the Knowledge Networks panel—combined with excellent customer service—can provide insights in a timespan not previously possible.

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS AS A MEMBER OF THE KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS TEAM AND HEAD OF THE NEEDHAM OFFICE? WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE ACHIEVED WITH KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS A YEAR FROM TODAY?

In Needham specifically, I want to provide the leadership necessary to enhance our productivity, strengthen relationships with our current customers, engage new customers, and support our employees' professional growth so that they are satisfied with their career development. And, company-wide, I want to help Knowledge Networks continue to refine its vision and participate in its growth. This is a company that understands they have something unique to offer twenty-first-century enterprises, and I think that's a very interesting place to be. We know we have something special, but we're not pie in the sky; that's an unusual and very appealing starting point for me. It's going to be a really wonderful adventure! ■