

Differences in Cross-Cultural Onsite Customer Feedback Elicitation

ABSTRACT

Collecting feedback from customers and users in different countries and cultures is a challenge for user experience researchers. Based on our experience of planning and visiting our customers worldwide, this paper discusses the differences of communication processes and styles in conducting customer site visit studies in the US and China, and proposes guidelines for planning and executing onsite customer feedback elicitation activities in China.

Author Keywords

Cross-cultural user experience, user research, feedback elicitation, customer visit, US and China.

ACM Classification Keywords

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and internationalization has expanded the scope of our customers beyond geopolitical boundaries. User experience researchers have been facing the challenge of understanding our customers in different countries, language and culture, and designing products that support our customers' culture and needs. We were fortunate to conduct customer visit studies (on-site group discussion, design validation, and interviews) in Asia, Europe, and North America. From these experiences, we discovered that the communication style of customers was very different between Europe/North American and China. This paper attempts to provide a better understanding of the differences of communication processes and styles in the US and China, discuss the feasibility or acceptance of various feedback elicitation methods with customers in different cultures, and provide guidelines for planning and executing feedback elicitation activities in China.

The face-to-face nature of onsite customer feedback elicitation exceeds technology-mediated communication methods on the aspects of communication quality and efficiency by easily establishing common ground [4], by

quickly building trust and rapport as being in the customers' work environment and context [1], access to artifacts, and facilitating conversation with visual cues [2]. All these benefits are present in cross-cultural onsite customer visits. However, we found we need to adjust our methods to accommodate cultural differences in planning, scheduling, and executing research activities. We focus on discussing two aspects of differences in the US and China: process differences and communication style differences. While process defined here refers to meeting planning, scheduling, meeting arrangements and other collective activities, communication style refers to the aspects of individual behaviors such as who speaks first and most in the meeting and how they communicate feedback about the product.

PROCESS DIFFERENCES

An onsite customer visit usually includes: (1) an initial contact to our local contact or customer contact, (2) a customer request for a research goals, (3) meeting layout, (4) meeting activities. In the following, we will discuss our experience with customers in the US and China.

Initial Contact

In the US, initial contact with customers was through account managers and/or referrals. We would then express our research goals through emails and/or conference calls, and offer a time window for the site visits. The customer can then agree or reject the request based on availability and/or interest. When the initial contact was made to customers in China, we sent the request to our local contacts, either sales representative or account technology specialist. They then negotiated with the customers in China to find out who are available for the study and fit the research profile. This required many follow up phone calls and relationship building prior to the site visit to confirm all details including who was coming, user researchers' resume/credentials and fully detailed goals.

Customer Request of Research Goals

In the US, customers typically do not ask for further information about our research goals after they receive the initial contact email. We did find in the US that customers didn't fully understand what our goals were until we discussed out goals in further detail in person. Many customers produced more users to interview and/or join our initial meeting. In China, however, customers often took a formal and diplomatic approach. They often request

detailed information about our research objectives, proposed activities, number of researchers, and researchers' titles and profiles. Using this information, they decide the meeting level and whether a CTO or CEO should attend the meeting. Additionally customers in China request a gratuity such as an onsite tutorial or presentation.

Meeting Layout

In the US, after we arrive at the customer site and all the attendees enter the meeting room, customer attendees often sit randomly regardless of one's title or level. In China, customer attendees naturally sit in a distance to the meeting center relative to their level and title. High level executives and managers sit closer to the meeting focal area, depending on the room and furniture layout. Attendees from the same team tend to sit with each other. We observed discomfort when we indicated for a customer coming in late to sit in an empty seat next to us. After 15 minutes the meeting came to a lull and the customer quickly moved to his hierarchy spot on the team. The meeting layout observed in China and US confirmed Hofstede's "Power Distance" dimension of culture [3].

Meeting Activities

Meeting agendas were provided to customers in the US but a confirmed schedule for interviews throughout the day were coordinated on-site based on availability. Therefore, we would adjust our research activities based on our research needs and customer availability. These activities include group discussion of customer's business/development process, group elicitation exercise on attendees' responsibilities and roles, feedback collection on concept designs, individual interviews, and contextual observations. In China, we found that we could not conduct individual level activities as individuals were not willing to sign NDAs and be interviewed or shadowed. Therefore, we need to adjust our activities to fit the special requirements of the customers. We needed to cancel our shadowing and design validation plans. We ended up replacing our one-on-one interviews with a questionnaire. Feedback on the product was collected using an extended group discussion.

COMMUNICATION STYLE DIFFERENCES

Who Speaks First and Most

Executives and managers in China dominated most meetings. It was very common for our customers in China to collect topics and issues from individual contributors before the meeting. Prior to our arrival, executives and managers would prioritize these issues by severity and commonality, and discuss them first in the meeting. They would ask for confirmation from the individual contributors. In the US, attendees are more equal and open in talking about their individual issues.

Critical Style

From Hofstede's culture dimension model [3], the "Hamburger" model could be used to describe the critical

style differences. In China, customers' critical style could be identified as a "Double-bread Hamburger". When they were asked what needed to be improved on the product, they often appreciated the new and improved features of the product. They then requested resources and documentations to better understand the new features. When asked to provide details about their use of features, they started to reveal more issues and problems. So it is a "Double-bread Hamburger" because we had to probe hard to elicit their negative feelings about the product features, that is, the "meat" in the "Hamburger".

CONCLUSION

Our customer visits in China were successful because we were able to be flexible and open. We believe that the following heuristics guidelines would contribute to the success of similar research activities in China:

- Provide a detailed meeting agenda and researcher profile.
- If an NDA is not acceptable to customers and eliciting feedback on concept designs is not possible, use methods such as using existing product designs and asking for alternatives, or replacing the design validation with requirement/scenario discussion.
- Ask regional representatives to coordinate, attend the meetings, and translate as needed.
- Encourage quiet attendees to speak up. You may want to ask follow-up questions: "Is this common in your work?"
- Use a collective group exercise.
- Replace individual interviews with a questionnaire survey. Consider conducting the survey as a group activity.
- Admit that the product is imperfect and that there are opportunities to improve the product. Keep asking about issues and probe deeper about the customer's use of the product features.

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