

# VOC in the Age of COV

## How the Coronavirus Crisis is Affecting the World of Insights Research

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### **Abstract**

*Well-known Voice of the Customer and market research expert Gerry Katz weighs in on how the COVID-19 crisis has affected the entire Insights Research universe. And what he has to say may surprise you.*

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Whenever I receive a call from a client, the first question after the usual niceties is always, “So how is the pandemic crisis affecting your business so far?” I almost feel a little guilty to have to give them the honest answer: “So far, not very much!” But that’s the truth. Few of our projects have been canceled or postponed, and we have actually won a few new projects since the lockdown went into effect.

To be perfectly honest, we don’t expect this to last. As the months go by, most companies will experience declining revenues and profits. And inevitably, that means that budgets will be cut. And if this economic decline is like any of the previous ones, market research will be one of the first things to go. Sadly, most companies, especially B2B companies, view market research as a non-mission-critical luxury.

While my opinion about this is admittedly self-serving, the truth is that now is the perfect time to conduct market research – almost all kinds, Voice of the Customer and otherwise. Why is this?

### **The Impact of Technology**

First and foremost, technological improvements have meant that almost all kinds of market research can be done remotely today. The world of market research, now often referred to as *Insights Research*, has always been divided into two major categories: *qualitative* and *quantitative*. Qualitative research is always about *words*: feelings, opinions, attitudes, etc. Quantitative research is always about *numbers*: ratings, rankings, tests of statistical significance, etc. Almost all quantitative research today is done remotely, sometimes over the telephone, but more often over the Internet. So no problem there.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, is traditionally thought to be best done face-to-face. However, today’s economics often dictate that they be done remotely, as it is hard to justify the

necessary time and expense to cross the country or an ocean for just one or two critical customer interviews. And with today's vastly improved video-conferencing tools, we can even make up for the small disadvantage of not being face-to-face. Finally, there are some researchers who feel that, for certain respondents, telephone interviews can actually increase their level of candor.

There are some limitations, of course. For instance, one of the techniques we use in Voice of the Customer research is called *ethnography*, an academic-sounding word for observational research. In many cases, it is beneficial to observe customers actually using a product or service in order to better understand their needs and to uncover any unarticulated needs. Obviously this can't be done in a world where social interaction and physical proximity can be dangerous. Even here, however, there are terrific tools available to conduct *mobile ethnography* in which the customer agrees to set up a camera in order to record what can't be viewed live.

There are many other market research techniques that may or may not lend themselves to being conducted remotely. For instance, in concept evaluation, prototype evaluation, and conjoint analysis studies, we can often convey the concept, prototype, or product attributes quite clearly over the web. But in other cases they must be seen live in order to be truly understood. Sometimes the customer needs to actually be able to "fiddle" with the product in order to respond knowledgeably. In these cases, we're probably going to have to wait until face-to-face research is once again permitted.

One other thing to consider involves one of the major precepts in Voice of the Customer research. Stated simply, "Most *needs* are pretty constant. It's their level of *importance* and *performance* that change over time." So, the greatest impact of the Coronavirus upheaval is likely to be a change in how customers *prioritize* their needs. For instance, I'll bet that needs around ordering, distribution, and delivery have become vastly more important now than they were just a few months ago (think toilet tissue!). This would argue for regular updates of the quantitative part of your VOC studies.

### **The Hidden Effect**

There is one final thing to keep in mind as to why now is the perfect time to conduct market research. In the world of B2B products and services, we all know that the recruiting of appropriate respondents is often the hardest part of any study. While this is rarely the case with B2C products, recruiting is usually a major part of the expense for research on commercial, industrial, and medical products and services. Well, just think about it! Almost everyone is at home now, and no one is traveling. And in fact, many executives and high-level respondents are actually looking for some diversion to break the monotony. To do a 30- to 60-minute qualitative interview or even a 15- to 20-minute quantitative survey often fits the bill perfectly right now! In the last month or two, we've found that cooperation rates have improved, and thus, recruiting costs have declined a bit.

So, while most forms of commerce have experienced all kinds of slow-downs and restrictions, this might be the perfect time to keep your innovation projects and service improvement projects moving forward. In the grand scheme of things, Insights Research is not that expensive and doesn't need to be postponed. Before management yanks away your budget, this might be the right time to field that Voice of the Customer, concept evaluation, or conjoint analysis study that you've been thinking about.