

# A Quick, Accurate Way To Determine Customer Needs

*Imprint analysis helps companies win loyalty and determine future preferences*

by

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**B**LINKED BY THE SPEED OF MODERN BUSINESS? TRY UNCOVERING THE hidden emotions of employees, customers and shareholders. With the right approach, this can help identify new ways to improve quality and encourage customer loyalty, employee commitment and shareholder understanding—all faster than you can say “dot.com.”

If you feel like a twig in a tornado, you’re not alone. Business leaders, particularly those working in Internet based enterprises, are facing a collection of uniquely 21st century management issues, many of them involving questions like these:

- Why did our new marketing campaign, which created off-the-chart excitement in focus groups, fall flat on its face in the real world?
- Why does our new product do so well in one country and so poorly in another?
- What can all the information in our data warehouse really tell us about the future?
- How can we break a competitor’s stranglehold on a market we’ve identified as essential for our growth?
- After our pending merger, how can we quickly create new products that will ensure the loyalty of old customers and bring in new ones?

## Noise in the data

Never before has so much attention been focused on the importance of understanding



customers. The quest for truly distinctive innovation raises the same nagging question: What do our customers really want?

Business leaders know the answer to the question is their Holy Grail and pursue it with every conceivable resource. But with regularity, business people encounter a discontinuity between market research and actual market performance. It comes down to one troubling behavior: Customers tend to say one thing during research and then do something entirely different. This makes any conclusion from even the most careful market research seem like an unexploded bomb: Is it safe, or will it blow up in our faces?

This problem is largely due to the reliance on traditional market research tools: focus groups, surveys and interviews. For exploring the boggy ground of emerging customer needs, these methods have always had a particular drawback. They don't deal effectively with contradictions in people's responses.

Such contradictions appear simply as unwanted noise in the data. When facilitators call attention to them, the subjects are typically surprised. They are quite unaware of having said anything contradictory and tend to rationalize their responses. This creates a false picture of their real feelings, which generates more noise and dilutes the usable data even further.

Actually, contradictions in a person's attitudes or opinions, particularly when they reveal a clear separation between opinion and action, are the most interesting data. They point to paradoxes that are a fundamental part of each human being's reality—a consequence of living partly in a world of conscious rational thought and partly in a world of unconscious emotional responses to the experience of life.

When the path of investigation leads deeper into the unconscious, traditional

## *But I Don't Want To Be French!*

In the latter half of the 1990s, European nations were engaged in many internal discussions and evaluations to determine whether they should join the European Union (EU). Like most of its neighbors, Sweden was fully in favor of EU membership, but in a show of strong democratic tradition the government opted to let its people decide.



The government planned a national referendum, but to assure a pro-EU vote conducted studies to learn the best ways to communicate the details to the voters. All subsequent communications surrounding the referendum were based on these studies, which relied on traditional research methods.

According to frequent polls, the initial results were good. Overall, the Swedish people supported EU membership. When polls began to show a drop in support, the government responded by increasing its efforts but used the same communication patterns suggested by the early studies. Despite these new efforts, support for EU membership dropped steadily. Soon polls showed the referendum would be soundly defeated. At this point the Swedish government called for an imprint analysis.

The government's early communication strategy took a very rational approach. It focused on the benefits of EU membership and offered logical reasons Sweden should join. But logic notwithstanding, the Swedish people interpreted these messages to mean something quite different. They believed joining the EU would mean relinquishing their Swedish identity and becoming French or German. This was the reason for the growing objection to EU membership.



The imprint analysis revealed the sequence of communication was critical—a vital detail that had escaped notice in the original studies. First, all communication pertaining to the referendum had to reinforce the Swedish identity. Second, this identity had to be communicated within the context of the EU.

The government then aligned its communication strategies with the findings from the imprint analysis. It shifted 180 degrees, acknowledging the difficulties of EU membership instead of just extolling the benefits. As a result, the polls turned around, and the Swedish people voted overwhelmingly to join the European Union.

research tools quickly reveal themselves to be inadequate. If obscure or subtle emotional issues appear, they are likely to be dubbed “soft issues,” a label suggesting unimportance, because traditional methods provide no way to address them.

These issues are often not even included in reports to senior management. And if they are, it rarely makes any difference, because executives also tend to avoid these issues. When customer data reach them, most will react like mathematicians, factoring out unnecessary terms. They put emotional issues aside, isolate the clearly stated customer opinions and build their strategies accordingly.

This reaction is both shortsighted and ill-advised. Recent discoveries in the neurosciences call attention to the fundamental role emotion plays in all aspects of human existence, including business. In particular, the work of Antonio Damasio, a neurologist at the University of Iowa Medical Center, sheds new light on the role emotions play in human decision making. For decades, scientists believed rational thought and emo-

tional responses involved separate neurological processes. But Damasio’s work shows emotions are essential to our ability to reason.<sup>1</sup>

This information is compelling, possibly even groundbreaking. But without research methods that can deal effectively with the emotional aspects of emerging customer needs, there would seem to be no way for business leaders to benefit from it.

### A new technology

Enter imprint analysis, a new technology ideally suited to this application. “Imprint” in this context refers to the collection of associations and emotions unconsciously linked with a word, concept or experience. Imprinting is always associated with emotion. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the imprint. Events and experiences imprinted with strong emotion at an early age usually last just below the level of consciousness for a person’s entire life.

The work of Joseph LeDoux, a researcher at the Center for Neural Science at New York University,

## Nonfat and Super Rich

A major ice cream company faced a challenge that was affecting the entire food industry—the shift in customer buying habits toward healthier eating. Determined to support its customers’ drive for health, the company conducted much research to understand how its products could address these apparent new needs.

Among the questions demanding answers were: Is ice cream too high in fat? Does it contain too much sugar? Should we develop a nonfat product? But before implementing any changes suggested by this research, the firm had its customers’ emerging, unspoken needs analyzed to learn more about the trend toward healthy eating and its impact on indulgence foods. The firm also wanted to get a clearer picture of consumers’ preferences for different flavors.

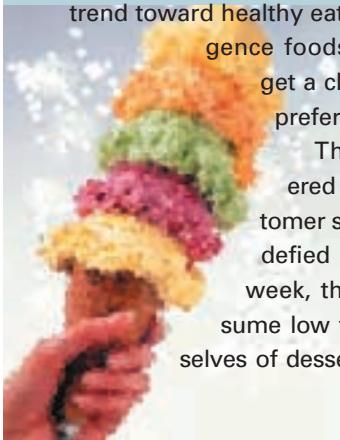
The imprint analysis uncovered a real surprise—a new customer segment whose eating habits defied common sense. During the week, these customers would consume low fat foods and deprive themselves of desserts and other dietary treats.

If they ate any ice cream at all during the week, it was low fat or fat free. But on weekends, these same people wanted a super rich ice cream, containing more calories than any ice cream then on the market. This need was a manifestation of their wish to reward themselves for eating healthy during the week.

The imprint analysis also uncovered another paradox. Customers who said they wanted lots of different ice cream flavors from which to choose still tended to buy those that were fundamentally vanilla. The analysis explained this paradox by revealing what are essentially two different senses of taste: one in the body and one in the mind. Ice cream makers must use different strategies to satisfy them.

To satisfy the body, ice cream should be conservative and safe. This means the flavor should be some relatively simple variation on vanilla. But to satisfy the sense of taste in the mind, ice cream needs to be exciting. This can be achieved by giving the vanilla variations exciting names, such as Monkey Jungle and Cherry Dynamo.

As a result of the imprint analysis, the ice cream company launched a new, full fat and extra creamy product and sold it at a premium. Its market was expanded, creating loyalty among existing customers while also attracting new customers for all its products.



confirms the theory on which imprint analysis is based. His exploration of the relationships between emotion and action led to four groundbreaking conclusions:

1. Emotion is the trigger to action.
2. The rational system follows the emotional system.
3. Actions in the present are dictated by emotions in the past.
4. Emotions in the present dictate people's emerging needs.<sup>2</sup>

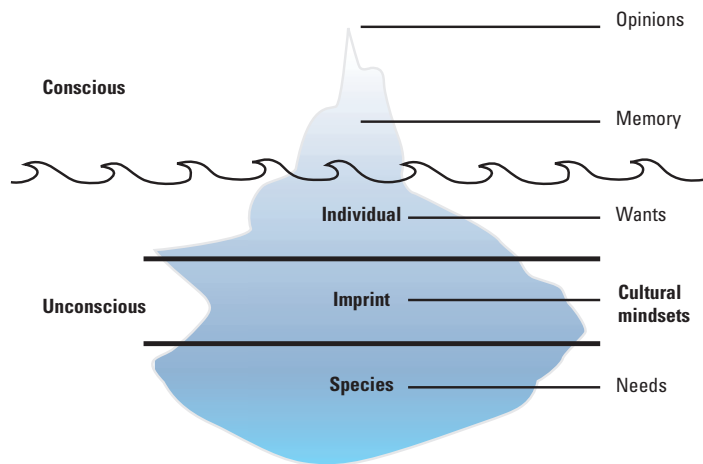
These findings suggest a new approach to identifying customer needs. By looking deeply into people's past experiences, imprint analysis can help companies understand what drives today's behavior and fine-tune their messages accordingly. And because the imprints of current experiences reveal emerging needs, imprint analysis can actually forecast customer behavior.

This forecasting is what really sets imprint analysis apart from other research methods. When you know how to look, the emotional markers in today's imprint will point to people's future buying habits and product preferences with remarkable accuracy. This is why a study of emotional markers assures business innovation will be productive and profitable.

### Quality and imprint analysis

Quality literature overflows with tools and techniques for assessing customer needs, but unintended

**FIGURE 1** Imprint Analysis: Looking Within the Iceberg, But Under the Water



consequences too often arise from well-defined and well-executed assessments.

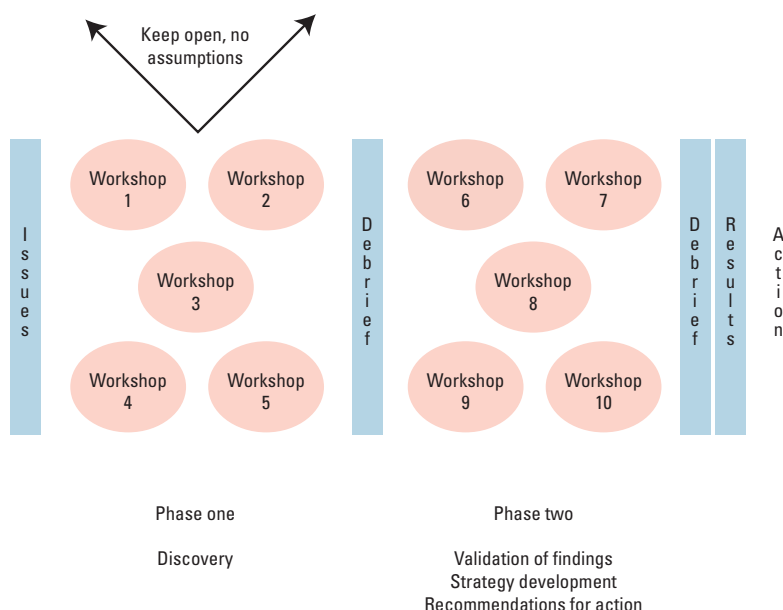
Take the case of Barclay Bank in the United Kingdom, which listened to its customers when they said they needed a bank they could trust—one that was powerful. They said they didn't need a friendly bank.

Barclay built a \$24 million communication campaign based on this information. It featured Anthony Hopkins extolling the virtues of "big." The theme was "Big is bountiful." Hopkins was heard in homes and offices saying, "Nobody wants to clinch the little deal. ... when you get a burger you want a Big Mac. ... When you go to America you want to go to the Big Apple, not the little apple."<sup>3</sup>

It was a brilliantly conceived campaign. Unfortunately, it was a dismal failure. Why? Barclay acted on what people said—on rational, logical data. It did not gather the other side of the data—what people believed but were unable to articulate—the data rooted in emotional imprints.

The campaign achieved exactly the opposite of what was intended. For weeks Barclay Bank was the source of derision in every United Kingdom newspaper, particularly the *Financial Times*. Many Barclay customers told Hopkins to return the \$1.2 million he received for the ad. Barclay not only lost \$24 million (U.S.), but it also lost untold reputation, trust and customer loyalty.

**FIGURE 2** The Project Process and Phases



People interpreted the “big” story to mean big executive salaries, big profits and big levels of customer dissatisfaction.<sup>4</sup> This is a story of good intentions going bad. And it happens too often when companies act on rational data alone.

### The imprint analysis in action

Rather than drawing information from the conscious mind, where ideas and opinions are readily available, an imprint analysis goes much deeper. It digs into the unconscious mind through a process that is, perhaps surprisingly, neither confrontational nor intrusive.

The primary tool is the decoding workshop—a group of up to 30 people representing the population under study. Typically lasting three hours, each decoding workshop involves a combination of discus-

sion, word association and relaxation exercises. A trained imprint analyst guides participants through each step, exploring past and present experiences, attitudes and emotions surrounding the topic. Although workshop activity may continue for eight to 10 weeks, this process produces actionable data in as little as three weeks—a marked difference from traditional methods.

Each succeeding exercise in the workshop takes people deeper into the area of their minds where cultural and universal imprints can be identified (see Figure 1). These exercises result in stories of past experiences, which are analyzed to identify the emotional structure common across stories.

For example, in determining what “support” means, the stories may vary greatly at the content level. One experience might involve learning to ride a bike with

## They Love Me, But They Don't Buy Me

For many years, a particular toy company struggled with a significant culture clash because its parent company and operating company were on two different continents. The company's performance was also disappointing. Its share in one important foreign market was consistently lower than the corresponding forecasts.

The firm conducted customer research using traditional methods, but none of the changes made based on these findings led to any improvement. Eventually, it had an imprint analysis conducted. The company hoped the new findings would suggest a way to increase its share in the problem market and also improve the relationship between parent and operating company.

The imprint analysis revealed issues that were entirely missed by the company's first round of customer research. It found that parents in the key market loved the products made by this company, but nonetheless bought few of them. It also revealed that children in this market—the real end users—tended to disregard the technical instructions. But to get the most enjoyment from these toys, children required some type of support along these lines.

The analysis indicated two specific things were necessary. First, kids needed proof or validation that they had successfully completed the “work” of using the product. Second, they needed guidelines for moving on to the next set of products.

Once these findings were uncovered, the company learned how to realign its strategies and marketing plans accordingly. This led to the creation of new products, a special kid's club and play guidelines specifically for this market. The play guidelines were the most critical element. They served to advance children's skills, assured kids enjoyed each toy to its fullest and prepared them for the next set of products.

Over time, customer purchases in the previously troubled market increased fivefold, and the company began to enjoy a highly effective collaboration between parent and operating company. Ultimately, and in the most fundamental sense, the imprint analysis enabled the company to increase customer loyalty, attract new customers and expand its market share.



your father, another baking a cake with your mother and another being nursed back to health during a hospital stay. What is common among the stories might be both the fear of falling, failing or dying as well as the exhilaration of freedom and empowerment.

Next, the other exercises are examined using the lens of the emotional structure to reveal a deeper understanding of what people say—the cognitively based data—thereby explaining the paradoxes that arise when words do not match behaviors. These emotional associations imprinted far in the past shape overt stakeholder attitudes and behavior—the unspoken rules that cannot be derived from direct questions.

The analysis process is comprehensive and time consuming. The debriefing sessions held after each set of decoding workshops (see Figure 2) describe what is revealed in the stories using diagrams of the forces in play surrounding the subject under study.

In the example, the forces arising from both the fear of failing and dying and the exhilaration of freedom and empowerment would be shown in a diagram. The implications for employees and customers would be explored using this insight. During phase two, further exploration of the subject would reveal the strategy to improve the support given to customers and associates.

In one situation, a major pharmaceutical company was interested in improving its market share position with one of its products. Believing it had the best product of its kind on the market, the company was baffled by its inability to increase its 30% share. Using imprint analysis, this company not only improved its share but also changed every aspect of interactions with customers, doctors and other health care providers. Its market share climbed to over 50% in less than three years.

Since 1988, we have applied imprint analysis in numerous studies in different parts of the world. This technology consistently shows itself to be superior to traditional research methods for understanding the needs and actions of customers, employees and shareholders. And it can quickly and accurately identify emerging needs, even of those unable to articulate these needs.

Methods similar to imprint analysis have been used for some time to identify new products. DaimlerChrysler's hit car, the PT Cruiser, was developed using very similar methods. The three sidebars, "But I Don't Want To Be French!" (p. 83), "Nonfat and Super Rich"

(p. 84) and "They Love Me, but They Don't Buy Me" (at left), present three examples where imprint analysis worked.

These case studies convey only a small sample of possible applications for imprint analysis. Since 1988, successful projects have also been conducted for companies in the pharmaceutical, financial, consumer goods, telecommunications, energy and petroleum industries in continental Europe, the United Kingdom, South America, Australia and the United States.

An imprint analysis is versatile and able to address a wide variety of corporate and civic issues. And unlike many related methods, it produces findings that remain consistent over time because it takes human emotions into account.


As the case studies show, hidden emotions are often the drivers of behavior for customers, shareholders, suppliers and employees. Imprint analysis

can even offer a glimpse into the future because, as we are learning from neuroscience, emotional experiences in the present dictate future actions.

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