

When Products find their Voice

Structural constellations – New insights for market research

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*When conventional quantitative and qualitative interview methods hit the wall, structural constellations may be a suitable alternative, reckon **Katja Birke** and **Marion Otten**. The two experts explain how this technique can be used to generate helpful points of reference for successful product positioning.*

Structural constellations have their origin in systemic family therapy, psychodrama, and contextual therapy. The basic principle of structure constellations as well as the term were developed by Insa Sparrer and Matthias Varga von Kibéd. Based on this foundation, Produkt + Markt Healthcare has adapted and modified this approach to be applied in qualitative pharmaceutical market research.

The constellations reveal potential interdependences as well as deep emotional motives and barriers which thus far had been inaccessible through traditional methods, or at least not without making huge efforts. They allow us to shine a bright light on the brand image, and let us reveal weak spots as well as idle resources relatively quickly. Constellations – from group discussion as well as from individual interviews – are based on the observation that everything correlates and interacts within a context or system. Therefore it is possible to visualise all other dynamics/factors within a market or system as well, such as the image of the manufacturers or their commitment to doctors. For the customer this leads to completely new courses of action and strategic approaches, especially in highly competitive markets. Additionally, the whole process tends to be very exciting and rather entertaining. For example, market researchers and customers are able to see what doctors really want, think, and feel. Furthermore they are able to find out which communication strategies are the most convincing on a rational and emotional level and promote the product effectively.

A Structural Constellation – Procedure

The workshop participants representing certain elements of the market (products, doctors, patients, manufacturers, etc.) are positioned in the room. Then the representatives follow their momentum and interact with each other relatively quickly. It's the facilitator's job to inquire about the representatives' actions appropriately and unbiasedly, yet also systemically, in order to illustrate the interdependences among the elements, and to paint a self-explanatory picture for the beholder. Based on the reactions and answers, one has a "sensory experience" of bonds, discrepancies, expectations, disappointments, blocking, or disorders. In the further course of the workshop, participants are repositioned, or they are asked to word certain phrases. Therefore new images keep emerging, which are used to test the customer's hypotheses, or to illustrate future scenarios (i.e. the market entry of a new competitor).

In comparison to traditional methods, trans-verbal language is used in structural constellations. In addition to common forms of communication, this approach particularly uses the language of space and the body. They allow certain dimensions to be perceived, such as proximity, distance or perspective. The body of the representative acts as a echo chamber; this means the participant captures the sensitivities of groups of people or other elements that he represents in the constellation. Hence relevant, surprising, and even previously unconsidered emotions and attitudes of the system members are quickly and directly pointed out – much of which the participants were not able to verbalise prior to the workshop.

Added value for the customer

Structural constellations prove to be a truly emotional experience for the customers. It is almost as if their own products were directly speaking to them. Behind a screen, and yet very close: The customer experiences a real and uncanny proximity to the market; he finds out about existing needs and deficits, or if the product could use better support in certain areas. What does the doctor really want? For example it might happen that the representatives of the product and the manufacturer are literally in each others arms. Or it clearly becomes apparent that the products feel neglected and underappreciated by their manufacturer. It is especially interesting when products interact that the doctors deemed almost identical on a rational level as well as ostensibly interchangeable. In that case the constellation can uncover emotional motives that ultimately lead to preferred prescription for a product. Exactly these insights provide our customers with true added value, and allow them to keep the doctors' emotional bond to the product stable.

Specific recommendations for action

An effective facilitation of a constellation requires profound methodological knowledge, which must be acquired in appropriate training programmes. Furthermore the results from working with constellations in market research must not be interpreted as “absolute facts”. They should rather be considered valuable insights that may be translated into specific courses of action for a marketing strategy. Hence we bring back our report to the rational level so that future strategies suddenly appear clear and obvious.

The Authors



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