



VOICE OF CUSTOMER RESEARCH THE ULTIMATE BEGINNER'S GUIDE

This guide steps you through the basics of voice of customer research including what it is, why it's needed and how to do it.

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Introduction

Voice of the customer (VoC) wasn't a thing when I started copywriting. Well, I'm sure it was a thing that big agencies did, but it certainly wasn't a standard part of the process followed by any copywriter I knew. Sure, we did some Googling, but now that process has a name: VoC research, and it can include interviews and more.

Before we get into it, let's take a step back.

What is VoC?

Hubspot defines VoC as "a research method that's used to collect customer feedback. A VoC program can help you capture how your customers feel about your business, product, or service, giving you insights that can help you create a stronger customer experience."

VoC is what customers care about and the phrasing they use to describe it. It's also what they expected versus what they got.

Why do VoC?

VoC can be used for two main purposes.

When we look outside the copywriting process, VoC can help business owners make better decisions faster. VoC is *not* brainstorming ideas or putting solutions to the test. It *is* finding the gaps that will help decide on a new product or service (or to change an existing one).

We copywriters use it to write better copy. Solid VoC research can speed up the writing process, as the information is so useful that it can feel like the copy writes itself. Readers also trust the author more because the copy replays the conversations in their heads.

The other (big) consideration here is that customer insights aren't always useful, and detailed answers aren't always true. So, your interview skills need to not only get people talking, but also to ask the questions that will give you *useful feedback*.

Is it necessary?

As I mentioned, doing voice of customer research as part of a regular copywriting project wasn't standard until relatively recently. I wrote for years without interviewing customers about their experiences and the copy did just fine.

But here is the thing. The copywriting industry has moved on and the standards have shifted. That little bit of Googling we did now has a name and a process, and the copy is better for it.

Whether you do customer interviews, use resources like customer service data or use review mining and social media to gather intel, **understanding your ultimate readers is essential for every copywriting project.**

Your decision, as a copywriter, is how deep you go (and, therefore, how much you charge).

Phases of VoC research

There are two main phases to VoC research:

- Phase 1: Discovery
- Phase 2: Analysis

This guide gives you an introduction to each to get you started.

Phase 1: Discovery

There are always multiple ways to approach a task, and VoC research is no different.

Interviewing customers can be incredibly useful, but it can also be time consuming and stressful when it's not a regular part of your process.

What you're looking for

You are specifically looking for details about a customer's:

- **Struggle:** Every (good) solution solves a problem, so you want to know what that problem is and the details of the scenario in which it happens. You also want to understand *the cost/impact of the problem*.
- **Hesitations or objections:** You want to uncover whatever causes buyers to pause before they say yes.
- **Awareness level:** From the five stages of awareness by Eugene Schwartz, this detail helps you to tailor where the messages go and how much extra information is needed.
- **Differentiators:** You want to find out why they made the choice they did. What made the solution seem different or better to others?
- **Success:** This is the outcome people were able to realise as a result of the solution they tried, the big benefit that goes beyond saving time, money or stress.

VoC without interviews

There are lots of ways to gain incredible intel about customers without interviews:

- Review mining (resource)
- Social media research
- Customer surveys
- Accessing customer service data, such as live chat transcripts
- Records of engagement with sales teams

(and more!)

Ask your client what they have available and where their customers have discussed their challenges, desirable outcomes and experience with the business.

Surveys versus interviews

A quick note about surveys versus interviews, as one isn't a substitute for the other.

Surveys give:

- Quantitative data
- Breadth of detail
- Priorities
- Preferences (i.e. what)
- Stated reality (what customers say they believe; what they *believe* they believe)

Interviews give:

- Qualitative data
- Depth of detail
- Stories and language
- How customers think and act
- Reality (how they actually live)

Surveys are great when you know exactly what you're looking for and there is no extra detail to unpack. **Interviews** are great when you need to explore the topic and ask more questions.

VoC with interviews

Interviews go a lot deeper than online snooping and will (hopefully) give you a gold mine of info. While I'm mostly talking about face-to-face interviews, the questions could also be used in an online survey.

Interviews: 3–5 people (either recent customers or brand ambassadors)

Surveys: Ideally, 20+ responses. Definitely 10+.

As soon as you involve interviews in your VoC research, you have to consider your process a lot more carefully. There are more moving pieces, and you need to make sure they don't drag on too long (as all this is before you write the copy).



Process outline

- Clients send invites to their customers
- Appointments are booked with you
- Interviews are completed and transcribed
- You thank participants after each interview
- Clients are updated with quick insights
- Detailed analysis is completed (see Phase 2)
- VoC data are presented to clients

Client interview template

As with all stages of your copywriting project, consider how you can make it super-duper easy for your client to do the things you need them to do. VoC is no different.

There is some natural friction around getting names for interviews so you can make it easier with a handy-dandy template. This template on the following page is one *you give to your client to send to their customers*, making the job of asking all the easier.



Subject line: A favour...? (With a reward)

Body:

Hey [Customer first name],

We're working on our copy at [company name]. In order to get it spot on, I'd love to know more about your experience with [product/service name].

Would you be up for an informal 30-minute chat with my copywriter, [your full name] (cc'd on this email)?

I know your time is valuable, so [your first name] will keep it super short (just 30 minutes).

They'll ask you a few questions like:

- How you've found [product/service name]?
- Why you chose [product/service name] over our competition?
- What are we contributing to your [business/life]?

These questions will be about your personal opinions and experiences, which means there are no right or wrong answers.

You don't have to keep it all positive (we're open to hearing any complaints you might have!), and there is definitely no sales pitch.

If there is an incentive: In fact, we would like to gift you [the reward you're offering] as a way of thanking you for your time.

All you need to do is hop on Zoom, share your experience with [your first name], and we'll be extremely grateful OR [incentive/benefit] is yours.

If you're in, schedule your 30-minute call here [LINK TO YOUR CALENDAR] before X date.

Thanks very much for your time.

[Sign off]

An incentive can be a great idea, as it often helps people to say yes to the interview. They don't need to offer anything too expensive, though. Anything between \$5 and \$25 works. Gift cards. Coffee vouchers. I bought book vouchers, which I thought was a great fit for my audience.

This template can easily be adopted to include a link to a survey instead of mentioning you and including your calendar link.

Some key tips:

- Make sure you're cc'd on all the emails, so you know who they are going to and when they are sent.
- Be sure you update the details in yellow.
- A calendar booking tool can help to reduce the booking admin.

Interview questions

Good questions deliver good data. In theory. When we're investing the time to do interviews, we want to maximise the return, and one thing to remember is that **the customer's word isn't gospel**. It isn't all useful.

This concept of good and bad feedback came from a chat with Hannah Shamji, former head of Research at CopyHackers, and it challenges us to ask better questions.

Feedback that isn't useful = hypotheticals + opinions.

Hypotheticals are statements like, "I would..."

Opinions are packed with bias and are fickle (no/low commitment)

The query effect is when people make up opinions on the spot just because you asked. Interviewees also don't want to look bad. And having detail doesn't make answers true.

So, we never want to ask questions that ask for opinions or hypotheticals.

- What do you think of...
- How would you feel if...
- Do you like...
- Would you use this...
- What if...
- How much would you...

Test: Is it FACT? Did it actually happen?

They will give you great answers that feel useful but not *concrete facts*.

The trouble with asking why... “Why” questions don’t really help you understand why. Get more specific and factual in your questions to get the information you need. Instead of asking “Why did you buy?”, ask:

- What happened...
- How come...
- What made you...

These next questions are taken from Jennifer Havice’s book *Finding the Right Message*, but they are echoed in other VoC resources you’ll find. Notice how factual they are, asking about the past or the present.

- What was happening in your life/business that made you realise you needed a [product/service] like this one?
 - Alt: Take me back to the day you decided to buy. Do you remember it?
 - Alt: What made you start looking for a solution? Why then and not before or after?
- What problem does [this product/service] lessen or fix for you?
 - Alt: When did you realize it was a problem?
 - Alt: How big of a problem was it? What was the impact?
- How aware were you of [the type of products/solutions] before you purchased/signed up for our [product/service/free trial]?
 - Alt: How did you find out about this product/service/business?
- What alternatives did you use before buying from/working with [this business]?
 - Alt: How did you go about looking for a solution?
- What was it about [this product/service] that made you know it was the right one for you?
 - Alt: What do you remember being most excited about?
 - Alt: What other products were on your shortlist, and how did you decide?
- What concerns or hesitations did you have before you decided to buy from/work with [this business]?
 - Alt: Did you decide to buy straight away, or was there a delay?
 - Alt: Was there anything you were worried it wouldn’t fix/do?
- What were you able to do with [the product/service] that you couldn’t do before?
 - Add: Is there anything you had to give up or stop doing to use this new solution?
- After you finished using [the product/service], what could you achieve that you couldn’t before?

Interview tips

Bring good energy. How you start the call will influence how well it goes. Be as rested as you can and take five minutes before the call to reset your energy. A quick meditation, deep breathing or movement will help.

Set the scene. The starts of calls are always a little awkward, and you don't have a lot of time, so briefly introduce yourself and thank them for their time. Let them know you'll be asking some questions and how long the session will take. Also let them know there are no right or wrong answers.

Remind the person you're interviewing that the session is anonymous, and their insights won't be linked back to them personally. This will help them open up and be more forthcoming with their insights.

Keep it to time. It's tempting to let your interview take as long as it takes, but a good interviewer keeps the session running smoothly and to time. If you find your interviewee is going off topic, gently interrupt and bring them back to the specific details of the question you asked. Or move on.

Specific (factual), not leading, open-ended questions. Specific questions don't make people think too hard and are based in their actual behaviour. Open-ended questions allow them to free form without being constrained.

Avoiding leading questions. That's a question that prompts or encourages the desired answer like, "How easy did you did it?" which sets the answer around ease (over other experiences).

Dig into the details. When someone says great, easy or stressful, ask them what they mean. You're always looking for more specific, factual and credible data.

If you have someone who isn't being very forthcoming, don't take it personally. Your goal is to become their friend. Here are some prompts you can use:

- Ask the question in a different way (see the alternative and additional questions above).
- Offer some suggestions to help clients focus their thinking.
- Stay quiet for a minute and use the power of silence!
- Try to dig deeper:
(continued over...)

- Can you tell me more about that moment? Where were you, what were you doing, how did you feel? Ask more specific questions.
- Can you say more about that?
- What led to that decision?
- Walk me through what happened and your thought process.
- Can you unpack that for me?
- What else was going on?
- I don't understand what you mean by X. Can you help me get what was happening there?
- What was that like for you?
- What do you mean by X?
- What does X mean to you?
- How would you explain this if you explained it to your best friend?
- If all else fails, move on.

No customers? No worries

You can stick to review mining, online snooping and other forms of research. There is a lot of VoC research you can do without interviews!

This came up on a recent coaching call and there were some great suggestions from members.

Zoe Heard said:

"If they don't have enough customers, you can also interview the right type of customer, even if they haven't bought the product yet. Like people who've been on their email list for a while who haven't bought yet – what's holding them back? Then you can bust some common hesitations in the copy."

Michelle Chow said:

"I ended up removing the customer interviews and swapped them for interviews of his brand ambassadors."

Phase 2: Analysis

After each interview, it's time to look at the data and compile the phrasing into a document that's useful for you. You *have* to do your analysis after your interview, but I think it's great to do it when the conversation is fresh in your mind. *That's how you streamline, baby!*

If you aren't using a tool that gives you an immediate transcription, do the analysis as soon as you get the transcription back.

You're looking for patterns and consistencies, and also **surprises** and phrasing that differ from your client's language. This usually crops up, as the way customers talk about a product or service is usually quite different from how the business talks about it!

Most VoC researchers create a spreadsheet with columns for quotes related to the main areas of research:

- Struggles
- Hesitations or objections
- Awareness level
- Differentiators
- Successes

Read through your transcription, pull direct quotes related to each category and pop them into your spreadsheet. Highlight or bold specific phrasing.

Remember that while specific phrasing is powerful, you're also identifying themes and concepts to use within the copy.

[Grab this Google XLS you can use \(and customise\).](#)

Timing

This is the kind of work that will take as long as you allow it to take. You could easily spend seven hours mining reviews and an hour chatting with each interviewee before analysing the data for another hour.

But spending this kind of time blows project costs out to become unattainable for most business owners, so you have to streamline your process (so you're getting to the good stuff faster). That takes practice, so these are simply timing guidelines.

Review mining and other online snooping

- 3–5 hours

Survey analysis

- 2 hours

Follow-up survey interviews

- 3 hours

Interviews

- 30–45 minutes per interview
- 30–45 mins for analysis (per interview)

= 5 hours for 3 interviews (with 30 mins of buffer)

= 8 hours for 5 interviews (with 30 mins of buffer)

Additional costs to factor in:

- Transcription costs

I want to highlight that these are simply guidelines on timing based on other copywriters within Confident Copywriting. You get to decide how many hours you will charge for (and then spend) on this work. If it's a new skill for you, it will also take longer but the more you practise, the more efficient you will become.

Deliverables

It's important not to underestimate the value of deliverables, especially when a client is paying a lot of money for your time. **VoC research is really for you**, the copywriter, but it can be useful to showcase what you've ascertained and explain how you'll be using it to boost its value in the eyes of your client.

It's up to you whether to make the VoC analysis or interview transcripts available to clients. Many clients feel the transcripts would be useful, but they most often just collect digital dust. I recommend keeping them to yourself unless a client asks and makes a good case for them.

After all, their investment is the copy; it's not *all your research*.

What do you provide?

I don't recommend you create a fancy report that takes you another 5 hours.

You could put together a little presentation with some top quotes in both categories, but make sure you put a cap on how long you spend on this.

A really basic version is to walk them through your own analysis spreadsheet, highlighting the consistencies, patterns and any surprises. This is a document you can make available to them as a deliverable of the project, as it's anonymous and just contains quotes.

A final note

Adding voice of customer research into your copywriting project can feel like adding brain surgery, at first. Remember that you can get a lot of information without interviews, which is a great way to begin. You just need to ensure the research time is incorporated into your project.

You can also include the value of this research as a selling point in the explanation of your process, project inclusions and deliverables.



Resources

Some resources that will help you with your VoC journey.

[Finding the Right Message, by Jennifer Havice](#) (Amazon)

Resources from [Hannah Shamji](#), former head of Research at CopyHackers. She has lots of video resources you should absolutely check out.

[The VoC presentation by Diane Wiredu](#) (YouTube)

[12 Voice of the Customer Methodologies To Generate a Goldmine of Customer Feedback](#), by Hubspot

If you have any others, let me know!