

CAN THE RIGHT METRIC MULTIPLY YOUR PROFITS?

An Introduction to Net Preference

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Are You Concerned The Days Of Rapid Growth Are In The Past?

The Right Metric Can Have A Multiplier Effect On Your Company's Fortunes

Part I—The Profit Pitfall

The Problem with Profit

The use of profit as the guiding metric is leading your company in the wrong direction—and is a primary reason why your company is not achieving its top potential.

Consider these truisms: Your fiduciary responsibility is to maximize profit; therefore, profit is the ultimate metric for managing your business. Increased profitability should be the focus of your Lean, Six-sigma and ERP efforts. The best way to choose among competing projects is to determine which one generates the most profit. Which of these statements is correct? None.

Manufacturers, which naturally gravitate to a cost and operations orientation, are particularly susceptible to three inherent profit pitfalls:

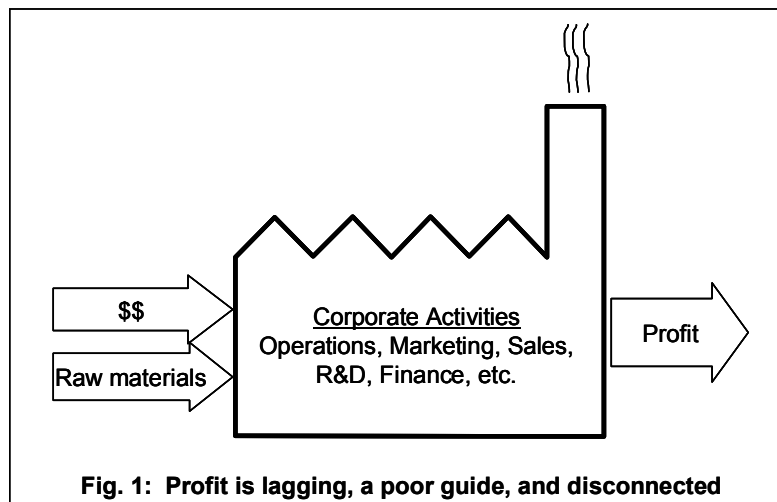
- **A lagging indicator.** Profit is the byproduct of actions taken in the past—sometimes the distant past. By the time declining profit catches your eye the damaging deed is done and the repair job may be extensive. For example, automotive supplier Johnson Controls ate millions of dollars in unnecessary freight charges for years before they were identified as a profit drain.
- **A poor guide.** Profit is merely a result. It gives no indication of which activities are lining the coffers and which are draining valuable resources. As a result, companies resort to complex

scorecards with dozens of “key performance indicators” and competing top priority projects.

The Highjump division of 3M issued a sales guide outlining the different metrics needed to convince various decision makers. Putting aside 3M’s observation that different offices in the c-suite use entirely different criteria to make funding decisions, it is interesting to note that not a single one of the influencing metrics was profit.

- **Disconnected from non-financial success factors.** Though profit is measured in dollars, many contributors to success are not: organization design, sales approach, cycle times, batch sizes and myriad other critical elements are poorly captured by traditional accounting approaches.

This was the case at Krispy Kreme Donuts, whose precipitous sales decline in 2003-2004 was preceded for at least six months by measurable levels of customer dissatisfaction. Customer satisfaction and profit had not been linked tightly enough to trigger immediate action.



A Profit Pitfall Case Study

All three of these profit pitfalls preyed on a Midwest packaging company we encountered. Faced with tumbling profits, they instituted an aggressive cost-cutting effort: every department was required to reduce expenditures 15%, they “leaned out” their manufacturing and used six-sigma to drive costs out of the system.

Management meetings were a cacophony of frustrated voices arguing over which cost-saving projects were most important, while “non-essential” projects were shunted aside to keep focus on the quest to preserve margins. In fact, without realizing it, their relentless pursuit of profit almost drove them out of business.

Just before doomsday, company leadership reached an epiphany: profit is a result, not a management metric. They installed a new approach which arrested their downward spiral and guided them to triple-digit growth over the following two years. The measure they embraced to guide all their decisions focused on the ultimate arbiter of corporate success: customers’ buying decisions. They correctly concluded that developing sustainable ways to capture more purchases would inexorably result in profit growth; conversely, attempts to boost profit often failed to put customers in their camp.

The actual metric they used was called “Net Preference,” a term we coined for a measure which directly ties every critical corporate activity to customers’ buying decisions.

Net Preference is a single number, like profit, but it is the output of a model which includes customers’ decision processes and corporate activities then connects the two. This metric is a boon to manufacturing companies striving to maximize their return on finite human and financial resources.

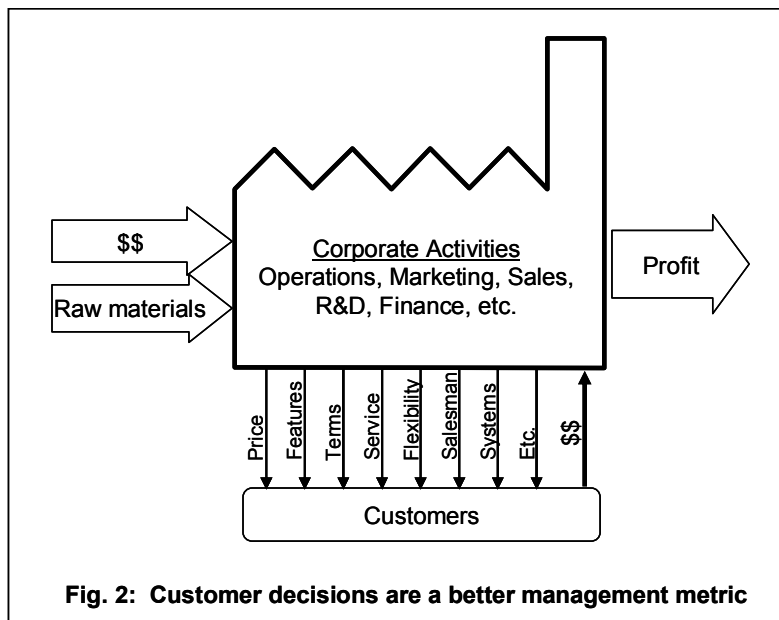
It is a leading indicator, giving immediate feedback if a planned initiative won’t create sustainable sales gains;

It gives very specific guidance on what projects will generate the greatest long term growth; and

It incorporates all success drivers—both financial and non-financial.

At the packaging company, the new metric revealed issues precipitating the ongoing profit slide. For instance, when we mapped every activity in the plant to customer's buying decisions, significant mistakes in the manufacturing flow instantly appeared.

This is typical of the money-making "surprises" revealed when a company substitutes customer-driven metrics for the traditional cost-accounting controls.



The mental leap from believing profit is the guide to realizing it is merely the result of favorable customer buying decisions is where many executives falter; however, a bright path of ascending profits is in store for those who use a customer-based metric to direct management decisions.

Part II—Using Net Preference

Net Preference (NP) is part of an overall approach which has created billions of incremental dollars for companies such as General Motors, Delphi Automotive Systems, Kodak, ITT, International Paper and many others. It is not magic and it is not rocket science, but it is very, very powerful and it has proven to deliver extraordinary returns for most companies who have applied it, particularly in manufacturing environments.

A large chemical company was able to use this approach to solve a \$1.2 billion dollar inventory problem which had been plaguing them for years.

A major automotive manufacturer put the approach in place and within a few weeks was able to cancel a \$120 million capital expansion plan because they could get the incremental revenue without the new equipment.

A packaging manufacturer reduced the turnaround time on its most important products from a number of weeks to one day.

An aerospace company which identified over \$1 billion in new market opportunities using this approach.

The approach has been just as effective in smaller companies, where a few million dollars in incremental profit is a big win.

So what is Net Preference, what do you do with it, and how do you apply it effectively? To answer those questions we've divided this section into four parts which we cover very concisely:

1. A summary of NP and its benefits
2. The eight critical factors for success—an approach which includes NP
3. How to develop the metric in your own company
4. How you apply NP to increase profits.

SUMMARY OF NP AND ITS BENEFITS

NP is a metric which captures customers' likelihood to purchase your offering rather than a competitor's. It is based on observational data as well as traditional market research techniques and it combines quantitative as well as qualitative data.

NP is applied by building a logic map, or holistic business systems map, connecting the factors driving customers' choices back through the activities and events happening in the organization.

Among its benefits are the alignment of individuals and departments across the organization around a common goal which they can directly affect.

In addition, management decisions can be made based on how something will affect NP, and optimization projects can be identified by using a thoroughly analyzed HBS map.

Finally, applied correctly, as part of an overall approach, NP has shown itself to be a very powerful tool for growth and has had a multiplier effect on companies' profits.

EIGHT CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

NP makes the most sense in the context of a larger approach which, when applied as a whole, delivers incremental profits. NP is just one part of the approach, but it is an important part, as you'll see in a moment. The overall approach has eight critical factors which can transform your company into a powerhouse.

1. Obtain rock-solid Sr. mgmt commitment to performance measurement and results-based actions.
2. Collect observational data on customers' experiences.
3. Build a deep, comprehensive model of customers' purchase decision process.

4. Establish a single metric which reflects customers' purchase decision process. We call this metric NP, or Net Preference.
5. Trace the purchase process back through elements & activities in the organization. We call this part a Holistic Business Systems Map.
6. Objectively identify opportunities and changes which will generate the greatest leap in profitable sales.
7. Competently redesign systems, processes, organizations, etc. as needed.
8. Build detailed, flexible transition plans

This whole approach is predicated on a belief that your overarching business goal, regardless of what type of business you are in, is to efficiently and sustainably make customers' purchase decisions go your way.

So, if you are Coke, you want consumers to reach for a cold bottle of Coke, not a bottle of Pepsi. You also want them to drink coke instead of beer, or juice, or water. You want them to drink Coke at times when they are not drinking anything at all. There are myriad opportunities everyday for potential customers to choose Coke and the company grows when more of those opportunities are captured.

If you are the Crane company, here in Connecticut, and you manufacture brake control products for the aerospace industry, then you want Boeing and Airbus and Bombardier and Saab and Embraer and the dozens of other plane manufacturers to choose your brake controls over Wellman and Reddaway and other competitors.

If you are the Solvay Chemicals division of Solvay then you want Church & Dwight to buy soda ash from you rather than General Chemical. You want PPG to be making glass with *your* soda ash.

In other words, whatever your company does, if you can sustainably and efficiently get more customer decisions to go your

way, you win. This is the result you should be striving for. It is the goal which is going to get you to success.

The overall goal for your company should be to capture more customer choices. But how do you do this? How do you capture more customer choices? And do you really even know *why* they choose what they choose?

If you did, then you'd probably have a higher market share in whatever segment of the market you are targeting. And even if you *do* know how customers make their choices, what do you do with it? How do you apply that knowledge practicably to your everyday business operations? That is where this approach and NP come in.

Net Preference

NP is a metric, a single number, which quantifies how well your company is delivering against customers' purchase decisions. One number which says you are going to capture more or less of the purchase opportunities in the marketplace. More bottles of Coke versus Pepsi. More airplane braking systems. More of whatever it is you sell.

The beauty of this one number is that everyone in the company can understand what it means—it means more customer decisions going your way—and if you use it well, everyone in the company can understand how their actions make that number go up and down.

A single metric which captures the ultimate predictor of whether or not your company is going to be successful allows you to get alignment across the organization.

We were in a plant some years ago and the plant manager wanted to change the gravity feed production system which dated from the early 1900s to a modernized conveyor system.

The executive team asked him how much the new system would increase NP and he said it wouldn't, but it would speed up certain operations and make them more efficient.

The executive team again asked whether the new system would increase NP or reduce the cost of delivering the same NP and at this point the plant manager hemmed and hawed... then it was as if a lightbulb went on in his head.

Suddenly he got it, the request for the conveyor system was dropped and he turned his attention to some other systems that actually cost less but had a bigger impact.

Not every change increases NP.

Think of it like toothpaste tubes. Over the past 30 years companies have developed toothpaste pumps, squeeze bottles, unit-size toothpaste tablets and all sorts of other dispensing devices.

On an objective basis, many of these new dispensers offered excellent benefits over a delivery system that had been around for over a hundred years. Yet, what are you using today? A toothpaste tube.

None of those new delivery devices really increased NP.

That is what many of you are facing today—projects which promise big results, but your customer is fine with a toothpaste tube.

Whether it is marketing or sales or operations or finance or R&D or anywhere else in the company, if everyone has this same goal and, importantly, if they can understand how they affect that goal, a lot of arguments melt away.

Your executive team can evaluate a stack full of options generated by various product groups based on a single, robust metric... creating a painless strategy meeting.

Contrast this to ROI. Half the projects in the stack probably have no ROI associated with them at all because the team sponsoring the project can't figure out how to put a dollar metric on an idea which is not financial in nature. Another bunch of options have ROIs that everyone knows are bogus for the same reason. Now you have people fighting for pet projects

and no reliable, robust way of making an objective decision between them.

One number, the right number, is a beautiful thing. As an aside, this number isn't purchase intent because you need it to be based on what customers actually do, not what they *say* they are *going* to do.

Gas pipeline operators say they will buy whatever monitoring equipment is most accurate and most efficient. But what they *do* is purchase equipment that preserves relationships with vendors they have come to rely on for many years.

HOW TO DEVELOP NP IN YOUR OWN COMPANY

NP is simply a mathematical representation of customers' decision process. That might sound esoteric and like an engineer's dream, but it is really not.

Let's say that you make staplers and the only thing important to your customers is whether the color of the stapler is red or blue. You make red staplers and your competition makes blue staplers. Some customers buy red and other customers buy blue and that is the only thing that matters to them.

In this case your NP calculation has a single input: color. The value you assign to color is some number which represents blue and another number which represents red. Those numbers could be 1 and 0 or 100 and -100 or they could be the light wave frequency of red and blue. It doesn't matter because you only have one thing to worry about.

Example Of NP : When The Only Influencer Is Color

$$\text{NP} = \begin{cases} 1 \text{ (Red)} \\ 0 \text{ (Blue)} \end{cases}$$

In this example your marketplace is actually split into two customer segments: those who like blue staplers and those who like red. You have a 100% market share of the latter segment and a 0% market share of the former.

Anything which makes a stapler redder is going to increase your NP in one market segment. Any project which makes your staplers more red will make your NP go up.

Of course, in the real world it is not so simple. Your customers aren't making their decisions purely based on whether your products are red or blue.

Examination of Price

Some companies think the only important factor is price, so let's take a look at that. If price was the only factor in customers' decision making then the data feeding NP would look exactly like a price elasticity curve. You could put in your price and the NP—i.e., the number of customer decisions going your way—would be the point on the curve corresponding to that price.

The fact is, price is *never* the only factor. That is why price elasticity curves are curves. Otherwise they would be binary functions like the red/blue case.

Not only is there more than one factor driving your customers' choices, the drivers interact. In other words, normally I might buy the lowest price stapler from a supplier I trust. But if the supplier raises the price without telling me, I might not trust him and might not buy from him anymore even though he still has the lowest price. That is a totally oversimplified example. Project this to your own world and I'll bet the decisions are more complex and more convoluted.

Since the world is considerably more complex than red vs. blue, you are faced with three challenges. If you can overcome these three challenges you will be well on your way to making your company a formidable force in the marketplace and far more profitable.

1. How do you accurately determine the factors driving customers' decisions?
2. How do you assign some sort of quantitative scale to those factors, even if some of them seem totally qualitative?
3. Once you've assigned a quantitative scale to the various factors, how do you bake into one, unifying metric which captures all the interactions?

Solve these three challenges and I guarantee you that your company will be light years ahead of the competition. You will start delivering offerings to the marketplace which may even be subtly different but your competition will be scratching their head wondering why you're gobbling up market share.

We won't go into incredible depth because this is intended to be an overview booklet, but hopefully you will get enough of a grounding to see where to go with it.

Accurately Determining the Factors Driving Customers' Decisions

The answer is simple in theory and challenging in practice:

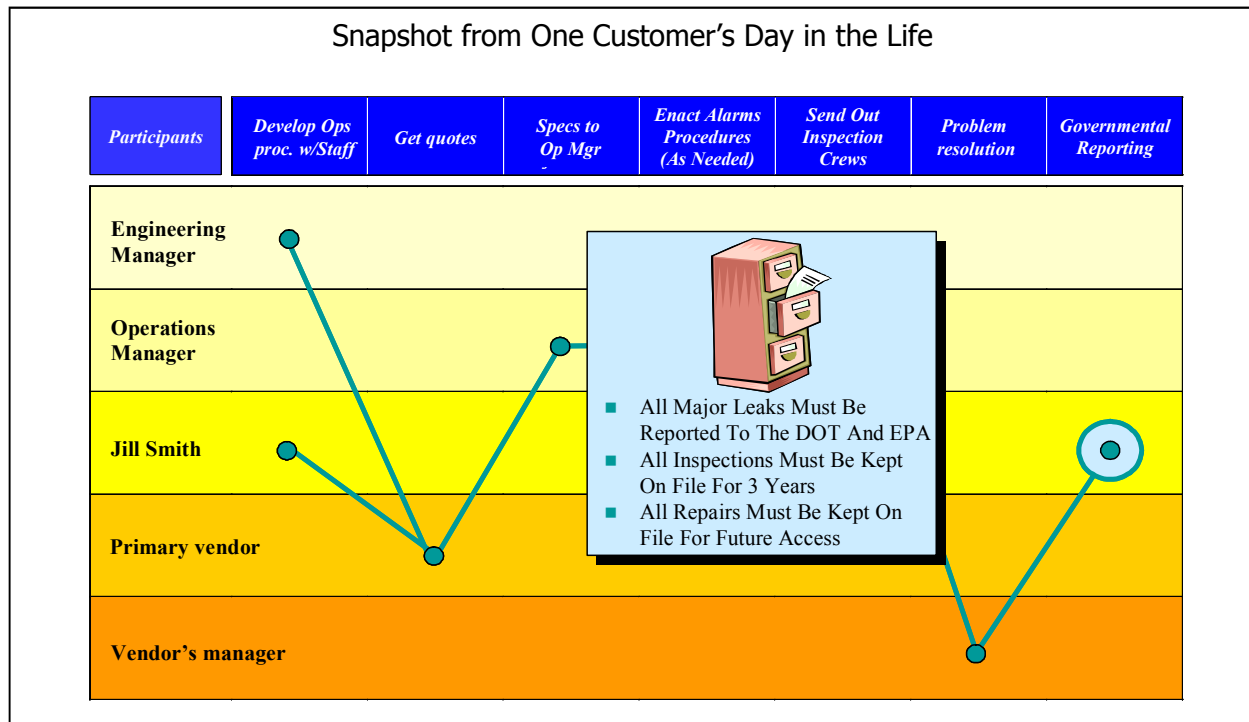
observation. More precisely: active, diagnostic observation of your customers through which you seek to understand objectives, motivations and influences.

It is very important that you don't rely on traditional market research—where you ask customers what's important—to understand the decision making process. Traditional market research is important and has its place, but it is not sufficient to give you the depth of understanding you need.

Henry Ford said it best: "If I'd have asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse."

Here are two slants on an anthropological or observational approach which we have found to be very helpful:

1. **Create a day in the life** – one of the most revealing exercises you can undertake is compiling a typical “day in the life” of your customers.



Get the real day with the real problems they face, not the day you *think* they have as it relates to your product. What colleagues, associates, customers and vendors cross their paths? What happens to the fruits of their labor? This kind of view is what gets you from a faster horse to a car.

2. **Take a systems approach** – consider your product or offering in the context of the larger system. Is your customer looking for a drill bit? No. But neither is he looking for the oft-mentioned ¼” hole. The customer is trying to create a stable rotor assembly in which the axle fits perfectly through the aperture in the fuselage.

Visa—the credit card company—spent some time understanding the overall system of consumers’ spending. They didn’t just ask consumers why they chose cash or a certain credit card, they observed the entire system.

They saw that people who used cash would dump their change in jars at the end of the day. So they developed a credit card program which mimicked that part of the system—“keep the change” and pulled in an extra two and a half million customers.

Converting Influences on Decision Processes into Quantitative Data

Getting past this challenge is part technique, part art, and part experience.

Resist the temptation to make everything a linear relationship. It is easy to assume that more is better, but that is very often not the case.

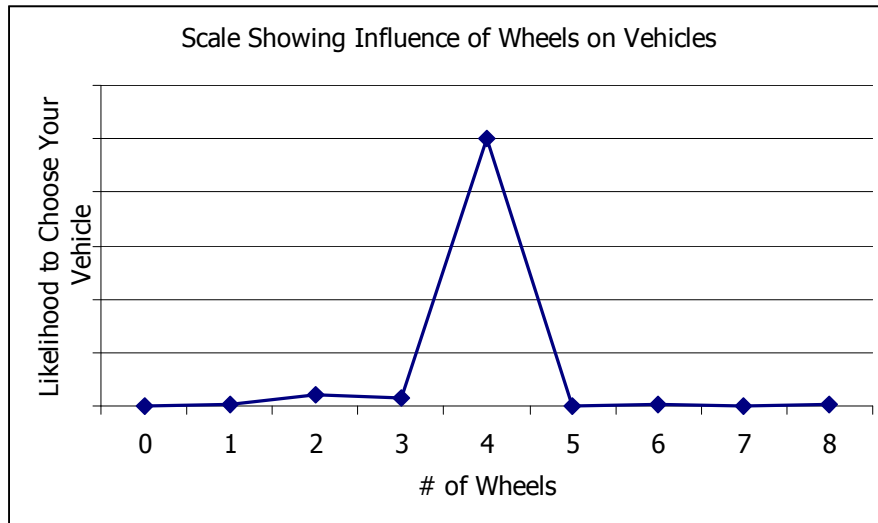
Consumers will tell you that one of the most important attributes of an antacid is that it is strong. Therefore, for years Warner Lambert and GSK introduced bigger and bigger tablets so that they could cram more active ingredients into each tablet.

Many years and tens of millions of dollars later they finally realized that strong only matter up to a certain point—the point where heartburn disappears, after which stronger becomes meaningless.

Sometimes there are inconsistent step functions.

Buyers far prefer two wheels on a residential vehicle to one. Adding a third wheel often doesn't get you more purchases, but a fourth wheel increases the market many orders of magnitude.

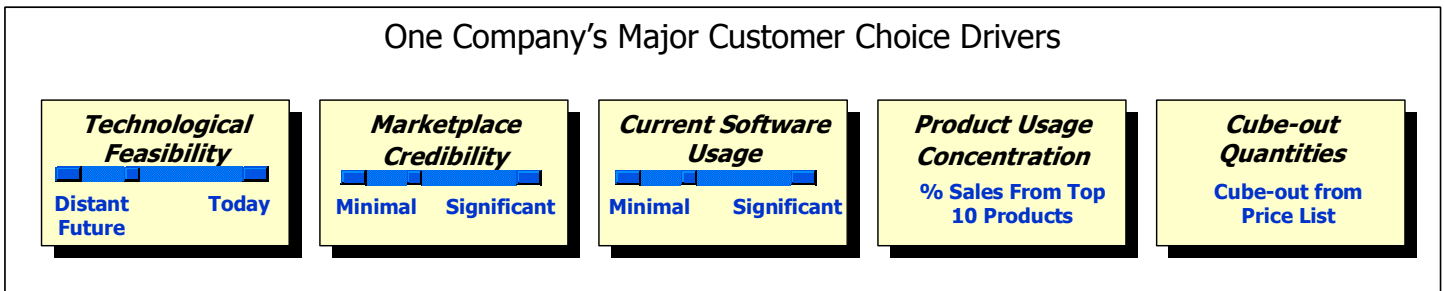
What about a sixth, seventh or eighth wheel? For most customers these are a total waste of time—in fact, the decrease the likelihood of purchase.



Without getting into the wonky depths of math, our suggestion on this challenge is to use good observation and be brutally honest with reality. Write down the entire range of possibilities for each driver of choice.

For instance, if the number of competitors is important you may want to create a scale which has zero competitors up to ten or fifty or whatever is appropriate in your market. Sometimes *which* competitor is in the marketplace is as important as the number, so your range of options has to reflect the specific competitors.

By writing down the options you can capture nominal data like a list of competitors, ordinal data like the strength of the sales relationship, and all sorts of measurement data that you'd typically work with like prices, weights, and so forth.



Every influencer can be put on a scale if you take some time and think it through. Again, just make sure your model reflects the reality of how

your customers' choose and don't settle for a linear relationship when customers aren't buying that way.

Comparing Disparate Scales in a way that is Apples to Apples

We want to give an overview which should steer you in the right direction, though this is another area where we're going to have to skim or risk writing a text book.

The easy answer to this challenge is to restate each scale in terms of its impact on the likelihood of the customer to choose you versus a competitor.

If the two inputs on why someone will buy a stapler are color and price, you can capture each based on how much influence they have, and what *type* of influence they have on the decision.

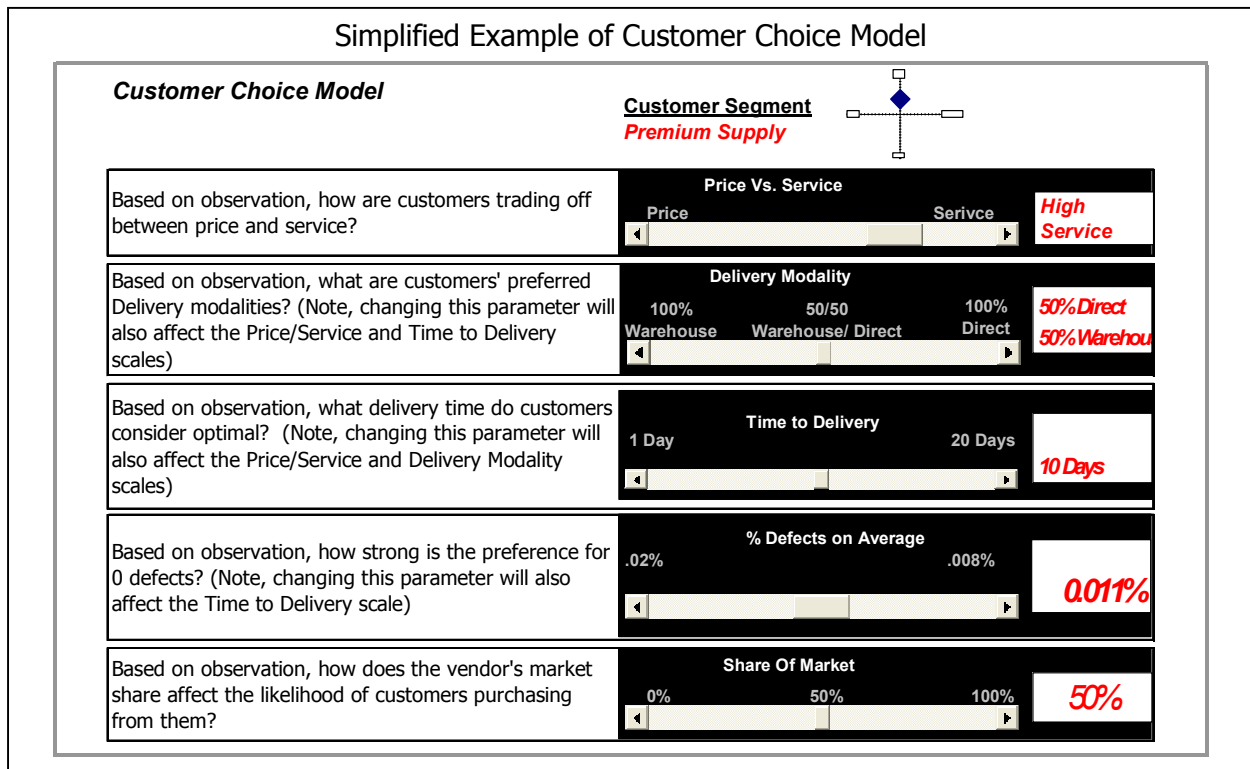
The color of the stapler may be a binary influencer—it is either red or not—and you may have learned that for each \$1 you lower the price, your chance of winning the sale goes up 10%... as long as the stapler's red.

We made the common scale likelihood to choose. Of course, to simplify things we also made the price curve linear and assumed the two factors don't interact.

We have found is the best way to unify everything into the single scale is to build an interactive model because the real world is so complex and the factors interact. The model allows you as an observer, or a customer – if you are the stage of research where you are getting direct input, to work with multiple drivers at once.

Imagine one of those mixing boards that professional musicians use, with all the sliders that go up and down. The professionals know that the volume of some instruments affect the way others are heard, so they move the sliders up and down, balancing the different parts until the sound is just how they want it.

The model works the same way, with you or the customers adjusting multiple factors at once until they get what they will choose.



This approach also allows the customer to guide the combination of factors for which data is collected— which overcomes two major hurdles in traditional design of experiments approaches. (Choosing which combinations to “test” and interdependent factors.)

HOW TO APPLY NP TO INCREASE PROFITS

To effectively use NP to boost revenue—and remember, that primarily what we’re trying to do is expand the topline, not reduce costs (though that often happens)—you need to connect everything you’ve learned about the customer to the granular activities inside your company.

How does the number of machines, or the handoff between two departments or the way raw materials are stacked when they come in the door affect customers' likelihood to choose your products versus your competitors? When we are doing this for clients we say we are building logic chains, and the collection of all the chains together we call a holistic business map.

Let's say you are Management Recruiters International and you sell executive recruiting services. You've developed Net Preference and you have determined that having six-to-ten well qualified candidates is very important to customers.

What goes into delivering six-to-ten well qualified candidates?

You have to identify candidates, and to identify candidates you need to make a certain number of phone calls, and to make a certain number of phone calls you need a referral list of a certain size. You also need fresh candidates coming into the pool so that means you need advertising, which means you need good copy to be developed, and so forth.

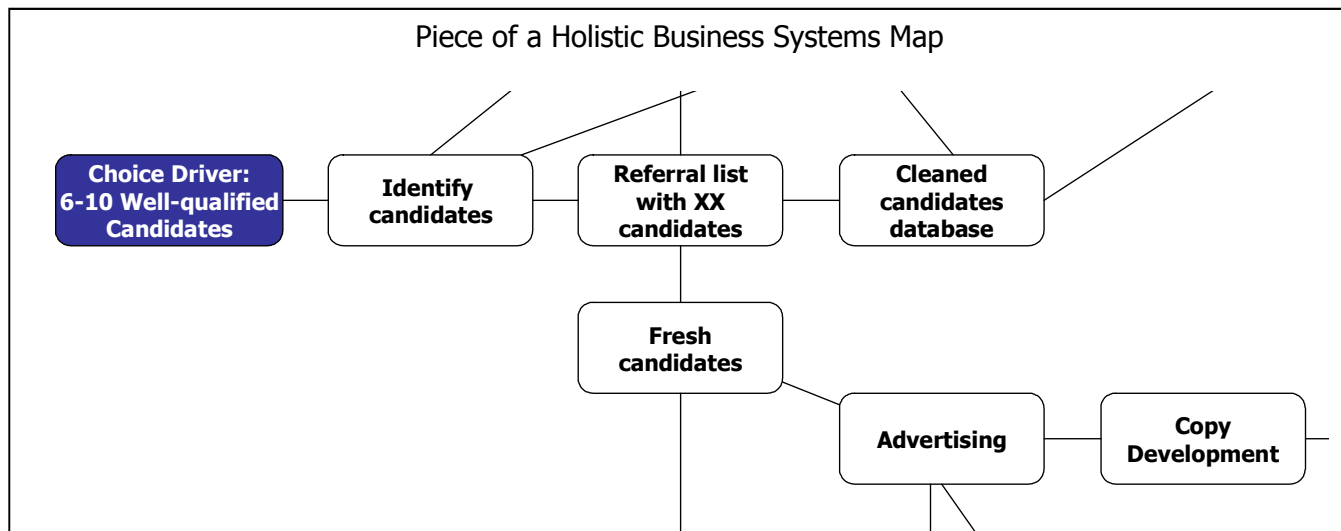
That is just to find candidates. There's also a whole other chain that has to do with qualifying them.

A couple of nuances are worth bringing up.

1. **We didn't focus on any pre-defined process**, for instance the advertising development process or the qualification process or the sales process.
2. **We didn't make any reference to departments** such as the advertising department, the references administration team, and so forth. The logic chain is blind to existing processes and departments.

It is sort of like a GPS device. You punch in the address you want to get to and it analyzes thousands of roads to figure out the best combination of roads to get to the destination. It doesn't care whether some roads are called interstates and some are called parkways. It doesn't care about the names of towns or where the state line was.

Logic maps work in a similar way. They connect everything starting with the customer and moving backwards through the company without worrying about territorial issues.



Building a logic map is tougher than finding the fastest route, though, because the goal is more complex, interacting and self referencing. To give you an idea, it would be like telling the GPS device that you need to get to a destination, but where the destination is depends on how you get there and, further, that a road you take later on may affect the speed of a road you take earlier in the trip. The GPS device would probably explode.

Most people's heads would probably explode if they tried to solve a problem like that because our brains are hardwired to solve one to one relationships, not multivariate, interdependent messes. Yet, the reality of most businesses, regardless of how try to simplify them is that they are complex, highly interactive, self-referencing systems.

Some interesting things pop out when you construct these logic maps. First, and most important for today's discussion, you start to see what parts of the logic chain have the most influence on NP.

In other words, what granular activities inside your company have the greatest impact on whether your customer is choosing your product or your competitor's. What happens even more often, is that an analysis

shows a combination of small pieces in different places can add up to make a big change.

At a uniform manufacturer, NP highlighted turnaround time as a major factor in customers' decisions, and the map showed limited plant capacity as a major culprit for poor turnaround time.

Hence, the decision most CEOs would make: increase capacity. But a full analysis of the logic map showed that plant capacity was tapped out because of constant production errors. In other words, the Sales team would enter an order incorrectly, leading to production of the wrong product which not only created expensive write-offs, it consumed valuable production capacity.

Answer: retrain Sales, right? Wrong. Drilling another step deeper into the HBS map showed that order errors were precipitated by an order entry sheet which allowed contradictory information to be entered and didn't clearly indicate which data fields were mandatory.

The error rate on order entries was exacerbated by the Sales incentive plan, which inadvertently encouraged sales people to write orders quickly, not correctly.

The HBS map unmasked a couple of other factors which were in very different ways and in very different places, having a deleterious effect on turnaround time.

Ultimately, the combination of solutions included new procedures for managing product components which limited work on the "easy" products, a new Sales incentive plan which required order accuracy, and a new order sheet which facilitated accurate data entry. (Amazingly enough, the mere reorientation of the information on the order sheet was integral to tens of millions of dollars in incremental profit.)

The result of these seemingly minor interventions was a quintupling of profits within a few months. Their order error rate sank to zero overnight (literally), and their turnaround time led the

industry. All without a dime spent on training or new capital equipment.

Note that we extended the logic chain all the way back as far as it would go and we captured very granular information. You can get a lot of mileage out of NP by building your logic chains at a fairly high level, as long as you extend the chain back as far as it can go; but if you really want to get the most out of the approach it helps to apply more rigor.

The extra level of detail is where you move from a 10% gain to a 40% gain, or from doubling profit to quintupling it. Of course, we can't guarantee specific results, but we can guarantee the approach works and produces remarkable results.

Also note that analysis of a holistic business map sometimes points out solutions which are counterintuitive or even contrary to solutions delivered by other approaches. This is because it is taking a whole-system approach and looking at how changes in one part of the company affect every other part.

This is also why we have found the approach to be very effective in solving problems which have resisted Lean projects. Lean, by definition, tries to take waste out of whatever process it is being used on. The HBS map, in contrast, sometimes indicates you need to add inventory or waste, if you will, in some places in order to have the whole system drive NP up.

You can absolutely do this process with paper and pencil. Chances are you will find that you end up with a pretty complex web, so you may ultimately want to put it on the computer.

Building a model also gives you the distinct advantage of being able to test a wide range of changes to the system very quickly and inexpensively. As human beings we have two cognitive limitations which computers don't have:

- 1. It takes us a long time to analyze** each possible solution to a problem. Even 10 seconds is a long time if you have billions of permutations.

2. **We analyze everything in one-to-one relationships.** One variable's impact on another variable. It is outside the scope of our wiring to solve multivariate equations where the relationships are intertwining—our solution is to use patterns and experience in these situations.

The computer has neither limitation so, while you can take this approach on manually, we've found that dynamic computer models are a huge boon.

SUMMARY

- NP is a metric which captures customers' likelihood to purchase your offering rather than a competitor's.
- Management decisions can be made based on how something will affect NP. Similarly, optimization projects can be identified by using a thoroughly analyzed HBS map.
- NP aligns individuals and departments across the organization around a common goal which they can directly affect.
- You can build the measure using observational data combined with traditional market research techniques. By carefully considering the scales you can marry quantitative and qualitative data.
- NP is applied by building a logic map, or holistic business systems map, connecting the factors driving customers' choices back through the activities and events happening in the organization.
- Applied correctly, as part of an overall approach, NP has shown itself to be a very powerful tool for growth and has had a multiplier effect on companies' profits.

We hope you enjoyed this booklet on managing with Net Preference. The information related here just scratches the surface of how the overall approach can have a multiplier effect on your company's profits.

Ascendant Consulting has led clients to over \$1.5Bn in new revenue opportunities through application of the NP approach and our new market efforts.

We have worked with well-known corporate giants such as International Paper, Kodak and Lexmark, niche industry leaders such as MRI Network, Domino's Pizza, and Gojo, consumer products stalwarts such as GlaxoSmithKline, Church & Dwight, and Whirlpool, and high-growth firms such as Biometrics 2000, Symbol Technology, and United Industries.

Are you ready to investigate a new way of managing the business? Do you believe translating customer understanding back through the organization can help you perform better? You could be one of the few new clients we will take on over the next six months.

Schedule a no-charge, exploratory discussion by calling David A. Fields, our Managing Director tomorrow morning. (We request a morning phone call because by afternoon we are knee-deep in work sessions with our clients. So, put it on your calendar for tomorrow morning!)

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