

# CUSTOMER CO-CREATION:

Engaging and Activating Advisors

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Leveraging Design Thinking to Uncover Better  
Real World Solutions in Advisory Boards



# Traditional Advisory Boards are Broken

These are real quotes we have collected from colleagues and clients across the life sciences industry over the past few years. The idea of engaging customers to better understand their needs and gain their perspective is alluring, yet the physician advisory board often becomes a stiff, uninspired affair. The truth is, healthcare brands do need to engage their best customers and leverage their insights, in order to:

- Understand real world challenges
- Source better ideas
- Gain feedback on in-market solutions
- Continuously identify areas for improvement

But, all too often, life science leaders fall into a trap. The inertia of doing things as they have been done before, the incessant pressures of quarterly budgets, and the stress of annual planning have made ad boards a table stakes tactic. Unfortunately, this standard approach to engaging key customers leaves a lot to be desired. There is little differentiation in the market, and this often leaves advisors uninspired, disengaged, disappointed.

From brand teams' perspectives, these events often elicit canned responses that are, at worst, simply what advisors think the brand wants to hear. At best, they smack of the same insights these key opinion leaders (KOLs) shared last month in a competing brand's advisory board.

"Most other pharma companies are conducting physician advisory boards, some in every state, and I'm worried we'll fall behind if we don't, too."

"We've done so many mediocre ad boards over the years that some of our thought leaders feel that we use them only as salespeople or parrots."

"We get them in a room, with a u-shaped table, we present slides, we ask questions, then we have a dinner... and it's just all the same."





## The Need for a Better Approach

These observations point to critical problems with “traditional” advisory board meetings. Many of these engagements seem to have taken a page from the old consumer focus group playbook. Instead of activating advisors, these meetings simply present some form of stimulus—from potential new sales aids to fresh data—and ask for a reaction or feedback. The father of focus groups, famed sociologist Robert K. Merton, would likely be quick to point out the obvious issues here. This approach is particularly susceptible to:

- **Sponsor bias**—the tendency of participants’ perceptions of the host company—and what they believe the host company wants to hear—to dictate their answers to questions
- **Confirmation bias**—the tendency for facilitators to seek out, favor and recall the information that supports their preconceived ideas or hypotheses
- **Habituation bias**—the inclination to give the same answers to similarly worded questions again and again without deeper consideration

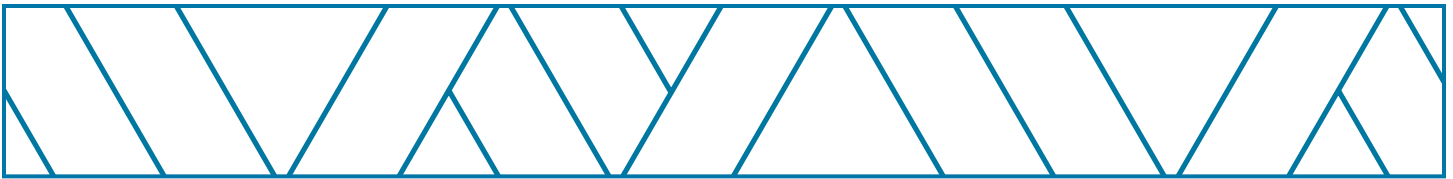
These biases stand firmly in the way of brands gaining real-world insights into the needs and desires of their customers.

### Fun Fact:

Consumer focus groups date all the way back to WWII. Merton pioneered the approach he called “focused interviews” at Columbia University in the 40s and 50s to assess the social and psychological effects of mass communication—specifically war propaganda. Interestingly enough, he’s also known for coining two other phrases apropos of our topic: self-fulfilling prophecies and role models.<sup>1,2</sup>

<https://www.amazon.com/Focused-Interview-Manual-Problems-Procedures/dp/0029209862>

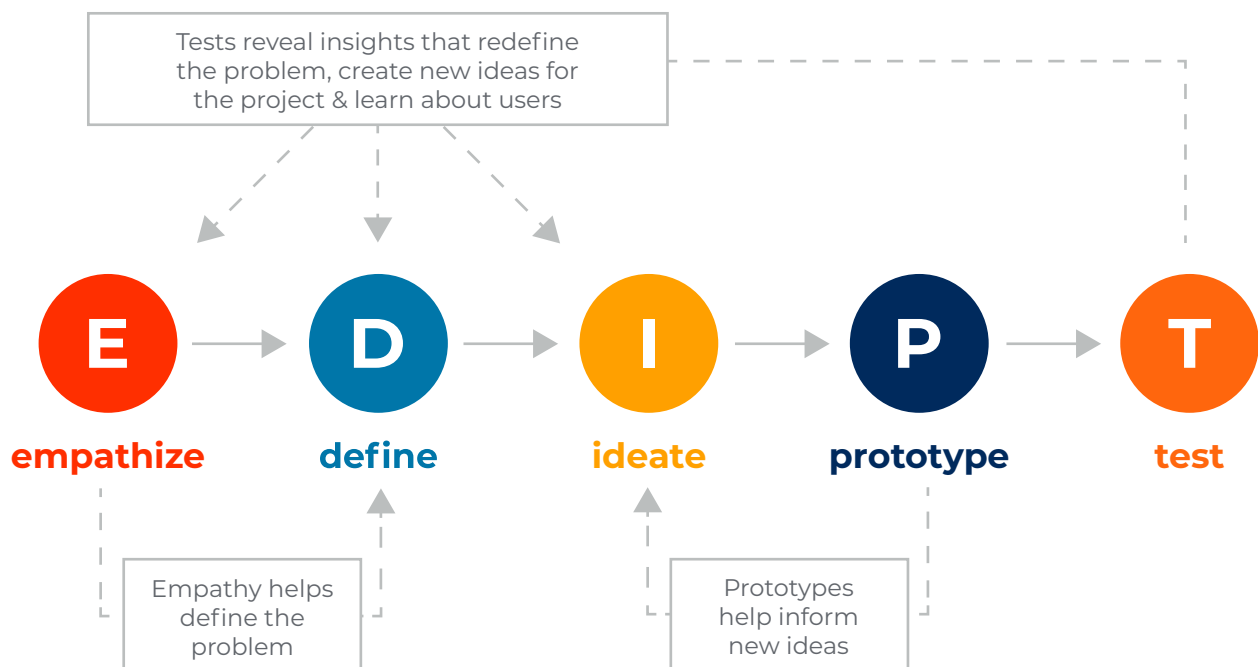
<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/24/nyregion/robert-k-merton-versatile-sociologist-and-father-of-the-focus-group-dies-at-92.html>



## A Superior Framework: Design Thinking

Interestingly, these shortcomings create a unique opportunity—the chance to transform a standard advisor meeting into true problem-solving through customer collaboration. **Design thinking** is a human-centered and collaborative approach to problem-solving. It's been around since the 1960s, but in many ways the approach entered mainstream consciousness through tech juggernauts, including Apple, Amazon and Alphabet. At its core, it focuses on five primary phases: building customer empathy, defining problems in terms of the customer, and then ideating solutions—ultimately prototyping and testing them, as well. In practice, the methodology has the flexibility of being non-linear, so learnings that arise in the ideation phase are just as free to fuel better empathy or a more crystallized problem statement as they are to lead directly to prototyping and testing.

### A Non-Linear & Agile Process



Applying this approach to the structure of advisory boards unlocks the power of collaboration. Physicians are among the most educated of all professionals, and yet the standard advisory engagement harnesses little of their intellectual potential. Instead of marketers generating solutions for physicians, patients or payers in a vacuum and then attempting to validate these ideas with advisors, this approach allows us to build true empathy alongside healthcare providers, explore their challenges, and ideate with them to better address their needs.

# The Fundamentals of Advisor Co-Creation

Our method includes four core elements:

## Tools Include:

**Empathy-extracting exercises.** Mapping dynamics are an effective approach for uncovering those customer pain points, challenges and opportunities that often elude even savvy life science professionals.

Patient or HCP Journey Maps  
Persona Archetypes

**Insightful and interactive inspiration.** Staring at a blank page is intimidating for 99% of us, but the right spark can quickly ignite a creative fire. A diverse set of stimuli, including insights sourced from disparate stakeholders as well as case studies of how others have addressed analogous challenges, is an invaluable accelerator of ideation.

Poignant data points  
Subject matter expert insights  
Case studies from inside and outside of the industry  
Emerging trends from across healthcare

**Collaborative creation.** When the time for ideation arrives, establishing a dynamic that strikes the right balance between collaboration and competition is the best bet for optimal results.

Ideation workmats  
Shareback posters

**Powerful prioritization.** Once the event is over, the work for both the brand team and the advisors is far from done. Run properly, these engagements produce dozens and dozens of innovative ideas. In reality, few brands have the budget, time or staff to execute them all. Instead, once the session's ideas are collected, elevated and completed, there is an opportunity to reengage the advisors in a short virtual session to help the team identify the handful that must move on most immediately to prototyping and testing.

IdeaBooks to capture outputs  
Prioritization worksheets and voting stickers



# Three More Ways to Supercharge This Process

- **Don't overlook prework.** It's a crime not to prime—short, straightforward, and engaging prework has several benefits. First, it lays a consistent intellectual foundation and prepares all advisors to hit the ground running in person. Second, it gives attendees the opportunity to begin formulating their thoughts before walking in the room, which diffuses uncertainty and empowers any timid advisors to readily share on the big day.
- **Recruit interdisciplinary groups.** Our best ad boards have included a cross-functional group of patients, caregivers, physicians and other stakeholders to generate a holistic understanding of the relevant challenges and opportunities. Added bonus: diverse minds have the potential to riff off one another in ways like-minds cannot, and this can create richer solutions.
- **Level the playing field.** All tools and exercise dynamics should create an atmosphere in which each and every person in the room can contribute. Start by establishing a common language that trades heady medical jargon for a lexicon of more human-centric terms. Whether it's time to uncover the nuances of the real-world challenges or ideate solutions, partnering physicians with patients or even the brand team members themselves can drive more comprehensive thinking.

## The Results

Evolving traditional ad boards into customer co-creation events completely transforms the experience:

### Passive Audience

Advisors as a passive audience providing periodic commentary



### Active Participants

Advisors as active participants collaborating to solve real problems

### Being Pitched At

Advisors feeling that the brand is merely trying to influence their opinions



### Influencing Outcomes

Advisors feeling that they are influencing the outcomes of the brand

### Presenting Fatigue

Brands talking at advisors while they sit and listen to presentation after presentation



### Inspirational Exercises

Dynamic exercises designed to inspire and get advisors working with brand teams

### "You Might Consider..."

Advisors offering suggestions they are not invested in, using words like 'you' & 'your'



### Ownership In Outcomes

Advisors taking ownership of ideas, using words like 'we' & 'our'

### Canned Responses

Typical responses that advisors have offered countless other brands over the years



### New Insights

New ideas and insights that are months/years ahead of competitors



**Final Thoughts from a Recent Customer CoCreation Participant:**

“I’ve worked with several other pharma companies on this same topic recently—everyone else just brought advisors in and spent the day explaining their tools and justifying their stance. [This company] is the only one who brought us in to help solve the problem... When will I hear which of our ideas become a reality? Many of these ideas need to happen.”

## A few questions we’ve answered through customer co-creation:



What kinds of partnership or collaboration do patients, physicians, and payers want from pharma companies right now?



What clinical unmet needs/new patient needs are physicians seeing in their practices around a specific condition?



What new tools do hospital teams need to support patients living with chronic illness?



How, can, and should pharma companies impact patients' out-of-pocket experiences?



How can we think more holistically about improving the lives of patients living with a disease?

## Conclusion

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Human-centered design stands as a crucial key to engaging and activating advisors. When brands co-create alongside customers, they unlock right-now-relevant insights that help create meaningful solutions and better outcomes.

## Want to know how brands can co-create with healthcare professionals?

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Learn more about physician advisory board offerings by connecting with our partners at Cadent Medical Communications, a part of the Syneos Health network.



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Ellen brings a unique blend of scientific expertise and strategic thinking to the co-creation discipline at Cadent Medical Communications. Throughout her career in medical communications, she has amassed significant experience using this approach to develop strategic, compelling educational content and platforms with clients and thought leaders across therapeutic categories, both domestic and global. Ellen has learned the three critical components to a highly engaging and productive co-creation session are the right inputs, advisors, and perhaps most importantly, energy. These are applied routinely to every session Cadent executes. And the value of co-creation is limitless. As one thought leader put it, the co-creation session he attended “was the best meeting like this I have been to in 15 years.”

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Cadent Medical Communications develops advisory boards that deliver not only the feedback that clients ask for—but the insights that differentiate. A deep bench of strategists and scientists fuels Cadent’s proprietary approach to co-creation. Their real-world insights guide marketing and medical teams in crafting the most potent content to drive action in the healthcare community.



#### ABOUT SYNEOS HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS

Syneos Health Communications is the only healthcare communications network that is part of a company on the frontlines of healthcare, with a clear view into the everyday complexities of life and health. As part of Syneos Health™, our agencies—consisting of leading brands and experts in advertising, branding, public relations, managed markets and medical communications—are engaged in every point of influence in health, providing real-world insight into markets and audiences in ways that no other partner could.

We work in scalable, collaborative teams that partner across disciplines and geographies to deliver integrated communications strategies that accelerate brand performance. Our agency teams have received more than 1,000 awards for work that disrupts markets and drives behavior change. We create ideas that will work in the real world because they were built there.

Find out more at [syneoshealthcommunications.com](https://syneoshealthcommunications.com)

