The 6W Customer Model

Idea In Short

Companies that analyze only who buys their product miss half the picture entirely. Leaders should apply Ferrell's 6W model, examining who, what, where, when, why and why not customers purchase. The sixth question, addressing non-purchase, often reveals the most actionable strategic insight of all. The immediate decision is this: before your next campaign or product refinement, answer why potential customers are choosing not to buy, not only why current customers do.

The 6W model of customer analysis originates with marketing scholar O.C. Ferrell, and it functions as a component of external analysis within the broader ABCD analysis framework used to examine an organization's operating environment.1 The model extends an earlier and simpler 5W approach to customer analysis, adding a sixth question that captures a dimension the original five questions left unexamined entirely.

That sixth addition asks why potential customers do not purchase a given product or service, a question that frequently proves more revealing than any of the other five combined.2 Organizations often struggle to answer this question directly, since the people best positioned to explain it, the potential customers who walked away, rarely volunteer that feedback unprompted. This difficulty is precisely why the question earns its place in the model, since insight that is hard to obtain tends to be insight competitors have not yet acted on either.

The model's broader purpose is to map an organization's unconscious assumptions about its customer base against actual customer behavior and motivation. Companies frequently operate on outdated or incomplete pictures of their customers, continuing campaigns and product decisions built on assumptions that no longer hold. The 6W model exists to surface these gaps systematically, using structured questions rather than ad hoc impressions gathered informally over time.

The Six Questions in Detail

The first question, who, asks which individuals or organizations represent current and potential customers, characterized by demographic, geographic and psychological attributes.3 This question also probes whether these customers are influenced during the purchase process by other parties, such as family members, colleagues or trusted advisors whose opinions shape the final decision even when they are not the ones paying.

The second question, what, examines what customers actually do with the product or service once purchased, including whether they combine it with other products and what happens after consumption concludes. This question matters because a company's assumptions about product usage often diverge sharply from reality, and that divergence can point directly toward underused features or unexpected use cases worth developing further. The third question, where, investigates where customers purchase the product, covering whether e-commerce plays a significant role and whether the product reaches customers through non-traditional points of sale worth expanding.

The fourth question, when, explores timing, asking whether promotions affect purchase volume and whether consumption patterns shift due to changes in a customer's physical environment, social context or perception of time. The fifth question, why, digs into the customer's underlying motivation for selecting a particular product, examining the product's basic properties, the customer's actual needs, and how well the organization's offering fulfills those needs relative to competitors. This question also asks whether customer needs are likely to shift in the future, forcing a forward-looking dimension into what might otherwise become a purely backward-looking exercise.

The sixth question addresses why potential customers do not purchase, probing which payment methods customers prefer, whether they have sufficient budget, whether credit options exist, and whether customers form lasting relationships with the company or treat every purchase as a one-off transaction. This final question closes the loop the other five leave open, since understanding purchase behavior without understanding non-purchase behavior gives an incomplete view of the addressable market.

Segmentation Within the 6W Framework

Segmentation forms a critical component of the 6W model, particularly within the who

question, since the model treats the market as something that should be subdivided into distinct customer types rather than analyzed as a single undifferentiated group. Several characteristics can serve as the basis for this segmentation, and geographic segmentation represents one common starting point, dividing the market by region, from villages and cities up through provinces, states, countries and continents, or alternatively by rural versus urban distinction.

Demographic segmentation offers another common lens, drawing on characteristics such as income, profession or level of education to identify segments that remain relatively easy to access and target. Psychographic segmentation goes further, dividing customers according to shared personality traits, beliefs, attitudes, interests and values, some of which remain visible while others stay hidden beneath surface-level behavior. This form of segmentation carries particular power because it can reveal whether a similar product could succeed across otherwise different demographic groups, since shared psychological traits sometimes matter more than shared demographics in determining purchase behavior.

Behavioral segmentation completes this set, dividing potential customers into smaller, more homogeneous groups based specifically on their purchasing behavior rather than who they are demographically or psychologically. An organization applying all four segmentation approaches together develops a far richer picture of its customer base than any single approach could provide alone, since each lens captures a dimension the others miss.

Conducting the Analysis in Practice

Applying the 6W model in practice typically combines desk research, which examines internal company data and competitor information, with direct conversations involving both internal stakeholders and existing or potential customers. Inputs gathered from sales teams or customer service and helpdesk interactions often prove especially valuable here, since frontline staff frequently possess direct, unfiltered insight into customer frustrations and motivations that never reaches formal market research. Documenting the customer journey explicitly during this process helps organize these scattered inputs into a coherent narrative rather than a disconnected list of observations.

Before beginning exploratory conversations or desk research, teams benefit from preparing specific, in-depth questions tailored to each of the six W's, since the model's high-level questions remain fairly abstract on their own. A team investigating the who question, for

example, should prepare specific sub-questions distinguishing business customers from individual consumers, and probing exactly how the organization segments its base today across demographic and lifestyle characteristics. This preparatory step transforms an abstract framework into a concrete research instrument that yields usable findings.

Once gathered, all this information should converge toward a clear understanding of customers, their specific needs, how the organization currently responds to those needs, and where meaningful gaps or untapped opportunities remain. This convergence is the model's ultimate payoff, since raw answers to six separate questions carry limited value until synthesized into a coherent picture of customer reality that leadership can act upon directly.

Strategic Applications for Leaders

Executives can apply 6W findings directly to sharpen marketing strategy, since the model helps determine whether an organization's current offerings genuinely align with customer preferences or require meaningful refinement. A mismatch surfaced through this analysis, such as customers consistently citing insufficient credit options as their reason for not purchasing, points toward a specific, addressable business decision rather than a vague call for better marketing.

The model also supports new campaign development directly, since organizations often adjust their messaging and targeting in direct response to insights the 6W analysis surfaces about changing customer behavior. A survey revealing that customers increasingly research products through non-traditional channels, for instance, should prompt a corresponding shift in where the organization invests its promotional resources. Executives should treat the 6W model as a recurring diagnostic rather than a one-time exercise, since customer behavior and motivation continue evolving well after any single analysis concludes.

- 16W Model Of Customer Analysis, Toolshero
- 2A Handy Framework For Your Analysis: Ferrel's 6W Model
- 36W Model Of Customer Analysis.Pdf, Course Hero

Summary

Ferrell's 6W model examines who, what, where, when, why and why not customers purchase, extending beyond the standard 5W approach. Combined with demographic, geographic, psychographic and behavioral segmentation, it reveals both what drives purchases and what blocks them.