

Small Business Marketing: Customers Want to Be Heard

Marketing today is as much about listening as it is about talking. This is especially true for small and mid-sized businesses and organizations that do not have the luxury – or the budgets – to lose customers or to be off-target in marketing efforts.

While many small businesses and organizations use various marketing tactics to get their products and services known, a lot of these organizations are not accustomed to regularly finding out what's on their customers' minds. As a result, they may be spending money to attract new customers while existing ones may be seeking out the competition.

Social media is growing, but not everyone is on Twitter or Facebook. Small businesses can still be challenged to get an accurate pulse of what their customers are really thinking even with the Internet teeming with chatter.

There are numerous tools small businesses can use to gather customer feedback without costly market research. Customer information-gathering should be an ongoing process of continuous measurements and improvement. Asking customers for their opinions can actually increase sales just because it demonstrates care. At the same time, be sure to follow up with unhappy customers who will feel even worse if they don't hear from you.

First, identify what you need to know:

- **Customer satisfaction** – How satisfied are customers with your products and services so far? How do they rate their experiences? Be careful – this does not tell you what it will take to satisfy customers in the future.
- **Customer loyalty** – What do your customers think about you given their other choices? How do you compare? How likely are they to recommend you to others?
- **Future opportunities** – What is important to customers? What are they looking for in the types of products or services you sell? Is there anything they would like you to offer that is not available to them now?

Track incoming data

Information comes into your business through inquiries, comments and customer behavior. It is up to you to develop a way to track and gather this information in a useable form.

Consider using software programs that will allow you to track sales data by important variables. What are customers buying? When and how often are they buying it? Who are your best customers? Which items are building sales volume? Which items are not profitable to your business?

Identify incoming customer inquiry points. These might include sales staff, the receptionist, Web site and others. Develop a way to record and track these inquiries as a means of strengthening customer service.

For every customer who complains, studies show there are at least 25 who do not. A dissatisfied customer whose situation is favorably resolved can often result in a stronger relationship. Do your best to invite and track complaints, while recognizing the risk of ignored complaints.

Actively seek data

Customer surveys do not have to be expensive or time consuming. In fact, lengthy surveys often result in low response rates, are difficult to analyze and produce ambiguous results. In many cases, four or five questions will do.

Solicit input on printed cards or via email following a transaction. This doubles as a follow up to a sale and asks, "How did we do?" You can also use this method to cross sell or offer suggestions to customers who may be interested in related products or services.

Gain more in-depth information by talking directly to customers. This method might be considered for repeat customers and those placing large orders. Develop a set of questions and keep an open mind. This is also an ideal format to use with former customers to determine why they left.

There are certainly more ways to obtain customer feedback: observation, discussion and focus groups, simulations, market trend analysis and others. Some of these are best left to professionals. In any case, hearing what customers have to say is an essential part of marketing. No matter the size of your budget, you cannot afford not to listen.