

Have You Asked Your Customers Lately What They Want?

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As the economy starts to improve, now is the time to start thinking about how your business can stand out from the competition. Finding out what your customers truly want can be as simple as asking them.

As we hopefully head back into somewhat rosier economic times, there's a good chance the competitive landscape is going to heat up. Now is the time to start thinking about how you can stand out from your competitors. And keep in mind that, for a while at least, consumers will likely not return to their former free-spending ways.

Coming up with your competitive advantage is not easy. But a good place to start is by asking, "Why do people buy from you now?" You can jot down all the reasons that come to mind, but you should also ask some of your steady customers why they keep coming back to your business. The answers could surprise you, or at least give you some ideas on how to maintain their loyalty and attract new customers as well. Last year Starbucks launched MyStarbucksIdea.com, a website where customers can make suggestions for other customers to discuss and vote on. Starbucks can see exactly what its customers want and decide whether or not to give it to them. This creates a dialogue or relationship with customers (much like social media does) and helps convey a sense of community. More importantly, it tells customers that the company values not only their business, but also their input.

You could adapt this idea to your business or try a different approach that accomplishes something similar. The point is that you need to find out if you're providing your customers with everything they want. Are there products or services they want but that you don't offer? Do customers want extended shopping hours? Free shipping? A broader mix of merchandise?

People need information. Communicate with your customers. One fairly easy way to do that is through a short e-mail newsletter sent out weekly, biweekly, or monthly. Share your knowledge. Offer success tips. Do you sell something that makes their lives easier? Have you added new services? Having a sale? Tell your customers about it. Do you offer a loyalty reward program? The key is to selflessly share info while "selfishly" promoting your business at the same time.

Do your customers feel they're being taken care of? During the "Great Recession" many customers (me included) have not been completely happy with the way they've been treated by some businesses, large and small. A friend and I almost walked out of a restaurant last week because of the surly greeting we received from one of the wait staff. (We did request not to be seated in her section.) I've been in stores where the shelves were either empty or too messy to find anything. I've had IT pros blow off deadline

after deadline. If consumers aren't happy with the "care" they're getting from you, it's all too easy for them to look elsewhere.

Good customer service doesn't happen in a vacuum. The tone is set from the top, but in many cases your employees are the ones carrying the tune. Essentially it's a chain reaction. Good leadership results in motivated employees and a happy staff leads to satisfied customers. Don't make the all-too-common mistake of believing that the fact you own the business makes you a good leader. It doesn't.

Successful entrepreneurs have to possess good personal and team leadership skills. Only then can you position your businesses to be a market leader -- and isn't that what it's all about? Market leaders set expectations, demand results that actually exceed those expectations, and create a superior customer experience.

But customer service is not just about face-to-face interactions. Is your website an asset or a liability? Again, the answer might surprise you. A survey conducted last year looked at web-based customer service and found it lacking. The two top customer complaints were:

- Customer e-mails went unanswered.
- Most sites didn't offer live chats with customer service personnel.

Creating a solid customer base is the foundation of all successful businesses. To accomplish this, you must follow the four principal commandments of customer service: *Honour your customers, honour your workers, and honour your principles*. And the fourth commandment is the most important one of all. The Golden Rule: *Put yourself in your customers' shoes*. What do *you* think of the customer experience? Would you come back to your own store, website, or business? Would you be a loyal customer of your business?