Build a Better Business By Listening to Your Customers

Do you ever wonder what your customers think of your business? Are you meeting their expectations? Are there area’s that need improvement? Will they like that product or service enhancement you’ve been thinking about?

All those answers and more are there for the asking. All you have to do is listen. You may be surprised to learn that your customers are generally willing to give you feedback if they know you are serious and that you value their input. They will usually give you some of their time if they see that you are interested in them and their suggestions.

There are many ways to get this information. Surveys by mail or email can certainly give you good information. But, a casual conversation can yield a tremendous amount of valuable information about why your customers are coming to you, what you are and are not doing right, and whether past problems have been fully rectified. You can also get insights on the issues and needs they’re facing, giving you ideas on ways in which your business can help them more.

I suggest that you try a “one on one cup of coffee” with a key customer. Plan for these meetings by actually scheduling time in your week or day. Buy them a cup of coffee and visit about your business and the service that you provide. Let them know that you value their input, that you appreciate their business and you want to ask them to help you to be even better. Limit it to no more than 15 to 20 minutes (honor their time and wisely use yours). Spend some of your down time in your schedule to do this.

You shouldn’t put customers on the spot for answers, of course, particularly if they are pressed for time. Instead, agree to meet or talk at a convenient time and discuss ways you can help customers explore their options and select the right action to achieve their goals. Remember, your small business will gain customer trust only by listening, not rambling endlessly about what you offer. Results are what customers care about the most. If you provide results, you gain their business.

Once you’ve listened attentively, you have the information you need to create an urgency to act that is based on the client’s needs, not yours. No need to push. Just use your knowledge to understand the customer’s own urgency. That’s why they are talking to you in the first place.

As you hold these conversations, common themes will likely emerge that you can incorporate into your service strategy. Also, remember that while you should treat all customers equally well, not all of them have the same priorities and concerns. An issue that Customer A perceives as absolutely critical may be hardly worth talking about to Customer B. Still, only a few minor adjustments may be necessary to address the needs of both, further enhancing your reputation as a can-do business!

Customer satisfaction is crucial to a small business. For more help, contact SCORE "Counselors to America's Small Business." These volunteer counselors provide free, confidential business counseling as well as training workshops to small business owners.

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