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# What Are They Thinking?

by DAN BEAULIEU



**If you don't know what your customers think about you, your business may be in trouble. How often do you request feedback from your customers? How often do you visit them? Call them?**

**R**emember, in business no news is bad news. If your customers aren't saying anything, it does not mean they are happy. It does not mean your slot in their vendor base is secure, nor does it mean you are getting all the business you should from them.

We all need to know what our customers are thinking, doing and buying. We have to be in constant touch with them, even if they tell us otherwise. The best way to find out what your customers are thinking is to ask them. One of the most effective ways to do this is through customer surveys.

Now I don't mean one of those worthless "rate us from 1 to 5" surveys. I mean a hands-on, personal contact survey where someone in your organization phones a key person at your customer's facility and asks them a series of questions designed to yield the exact information that you seek. These types of surveys usually consist of 20 to 25 questions, and are administered by a person in your organization who normally has very little customer contact. They will not only provide you with the information you want, but it will also impress your customers with your dedication, interest and eagerness to do a good job servicing their account.

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## The Right Questions

The key to creating a great customer survey is coming up with the right questions. Make sure they are well thought out and require short answers. Don't use the multiple choice or "check off" kind. Also,

conduct the surveys over the phone — never by mail, or worse yet — e-mail.

The first part should focus on your relationship with the customer and include the "how are we doing?" type of questions, while the second section should zero in on the customer. This is where you find out as much as you can about them, their technology, their products and their future. Two good questions to include are: What type of suppliers do you want? and what do you look for in a supplier?

The third part of the survey should be designed to find out how much your customer knows about your company, their perceptions of it and what it does. Ask them: How long do you think we have been in business? Do you know what our technical capabilities are? Do you have any idea what our annual revenue is? You will be surprised to learn that many customers don't know much about you!

You may also be surprised to find out the customer has no idea that your company specializes in producing very large parts, even though they've purchased a small production part from you for years. Another

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potential scenario: the customer may have no idea that a vendor specializes in military products. Instead the customer buys only commercial products from them, even though his most urgent needs are for military products which he purchases from less experienced vendors.

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### Winning Their Business

Finally, close the call by asking your customer what you need to do to win more of their business. This can be turned into a future strategic blueprint for this account.

These surveys should be carried out by a polite person who is well-trained and has a good understanding of the importance of this project. They should also have a passion for administering the survey ac-

curately. You do not want management or sales to administer the survey. Salespeople can identify the customers they want surveyed. You want customers to feel free to talk openly about any topic. Moreover, the surveyor should not push or argue with the people being surveyed, just let them talk. Remember this is, above all, a fact-finding mission.

Most likely you cannot do hundreds of surveys. I recommend that you do 20-25 of them with a variety of customers, from large longtime customers, to relatively newer, smaller ones. The survey project should take about a month to complete considering normal distractions, voice mail and busy schedules etc. Once the surveys are completed, someone must gather and condense all of the information and then present it to the rest of the organization.

Information gleaned from these kinds of surveys will also prove invaluable when it comes time to put together a marketing plan and collateral materials. They can even be used to explore the feasibility of adding new products and services. Let's say you want to explore the possibility of adding design services, or want to get a new technology. Surveys can help you gain valuable information about the potential market for them.

All of the information gathered from your surveys must be treated very seriously. If executed properly, they will provide you with just about all the information you need to develop a plan to meet and exceed your customers' needs. Remember, the worse the news is, the more important it is. Surveys will let you know if you're in trouble with a customer. They will also give you a very good idea of what needs to be done to "fix" that trouble, make your customer happy, and keep your business humming. □

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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