

9 1/2 Ways ... To Enhance Customer Satisfaction Research

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In a weak economy, it's especially important to get closer to your most loyal and profitable customers. Allocating dollars to research is one of the best ways to uncover what your customers want and what they really think about your business. Too often, though, companies go about customer satisfaction research the wrong way or pooh-poo results that are less than favorable. Here's how to get the most value from your next round of research:

1. Show customers they matter. An overlooked benefit of research is the opportunity to let customers know their input is critically important and impacts your product offerings, delivery channels, and level of service. "When you solicit information, tell customers their feedback will be heard," says Michelle van Schouwen, president of van Schouwen Associates, LLC, an integrated marketing communications firm in Longmeadow, Mass. "When you implement change, emphasize in all strategic communications that customers inspired the improvements."

2. Go beyond marketing. Too often, customer research stops at issues important only to sales and marketing, says David A. Fields, managing director of Ascendant Consulting in Ridgefield, Conn. Expand the focus to operations, finance, human resources, and other functions that impact customers in important ways they might not immediately notice.

3. Use plain English. When writing surveys and invitations to participate in research, use language that anyone can understand. For example, rather than coax customers into participating in a "research study," ask them to answer a few simple questions, says Geri Stengel, president of Stengel Solutions, a strategic planning and marketing consultant in New York. Also, avoid using industry jargon and tech-speak.

4. Don't lead. Leading questions, designed to get the answer you want, provide little useful information and turn customers off.

5. Think like a customer. When the owner of a small movie theater went to catch a flick on his vacation, he wanted to know if the establishment had fresh popcorn, clean floors, and convenient parking. That customer-centric perspective helped shape a survey for his own customers, says Chris Stiehl, coauthor of *Pain Killer Marketing*. As a result of the research, the theater owner now pops a

new batch of popcorn every 10 minutes. "In this way, customers coming into the theater could see, hear, and smell fresh popcorn as they walked in," Stiehl notes.

6. Convert your research into a story. "Storytelling is a superb tool that's being used by many organizations as a competitive advantage," says Sandy Gluckman, president of the Gluckman Group, a consulting firm in Plano, Texas. "People relate to and retain a story more easily than a bunch of facts." Consider UPS' whiteboard ads: the story they tell is compelling and commercially relevant -- in other words, it educates the consumer about UPS' services within an unforgettable context.

7. Get personal, but be objective. Conduct in-depth, face-to-face interviews with individual customers rather than rely solely on focus groups and surveys. But a word of caution: avoid asking someone inside your company to handle the interviews. "Your clients will share more honest feedback with a stranger than with you," says Lisa Nirell, chief energy officer of EnergizeGrowth LLC, a leadership consulting firm in Sunriver, Ore.

8. Reach out to a cross section of customers. "Select a mixed set of relatively new clients, long-standing clients, and somewhat dissatisfied or lost clients," Nirell says. "They all have something of value to share."

9. Give them a progress report. Most online surveys can seem like an endless stream of questions. Give respondents some indication of how far they have to go, Stengel suggests. And because online surveys allow you to access real-time results, you can determine if respondents are having trouble answering certain questions.

1/2. Don't let research sit on the shelf. Have front-line managers put together a plan in response to your customer research, with specific solutions to any problems that are uncovered, says Clive Mettrick, president of the Business Research Lab, a consulting firm in Houston. Be sure to ask for periodic updates until all issues are resolved.

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