

Getting Closer To Your Customers



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Knowing your customers – really knowing who they are and what they want from you - can mean the difference between having a growing business and having one that gradually slips away from its source of income. A business that knows its customers can anticipate opportunities as well as problems and have strategies ready for whatever may arise. For a small and flexible business this presents a great opportunity. It gives you a major advantage over larger competitors who don't consider that knowing their customers is important. To gain this advantage you'll have to put in some time and effort. However, it will pay terrific dividends in the long run.

Is your business culture customer focused?

Getting to know your customers will only happen when it's encouraged by the culture of your firm. Without this focus, team and management alike will not be able to see the opportunities before them, nor will they detect any problems about to arise. If the culture in your business does not encourage a sincere customer focus it's time to begin a programme of cultural change.

Get some facts together

Any business will benefit from regularly holding a Customer Advisory Board. This is a focus group run with a representative sample of your customers. Bring a group of six to ten customers together into a room to gain insights into what motivates them to purchase from you - and a lot more. You want this process to find the answers to some pretty important questions about what advantages they see you as having over your rivals, or where you need to do some catching up.

It's worth investing in the services of an outside facilitator to run the Customer Advisory Board; they will advise you on what to be asking about and will provide an objective report of the proceedings. And being outsiders they won't be tempted to get defensive over any criticism that comes up. That sort of reaction by a facilitator only runs the process off the tracks. Making up the sample of customers to invite along, deciding on the questions, and analysing the data obtained will really work a lot better if handled by somebody with experience in running Customer Advisory Boards.

But for suggestions on what to ask about, such as quality of after sales service and so on, there's no better source than your own team members who deal directly with customers. They'll hear the good and the bad before anyone else and will know what issues already concern customers.

Another excellent source of information that can signal which issues to seek information on comes from customer complaints. However, don't base your *whole* customer relations strategy on the complaints you receive. Complaints usually come from a minority that isn't representative of the customer base as a whole.

Do something with what you learn

You can use your findings to identify areas where urgent attention is needed. You can also see where you're already doing things to the satisfaction of your customers. Knowing your customers and their needs is an ongoing process. Once you've set your benchmarks for the level of quality you want to put into customer service you can begin a programme of regular checking with customers to measure your progress as it happens.

Keep in touch with your customers

Give your customers a feeling of participation and let them know you care about their feelings and are working to deliver value. Just as product development can, and should be, an ongoing process, so should the gathering of customer information. With a PC and one of the many simple customer relationship applications around these days you can create and maintain an excellent customer information database. Names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses and any other key details, even birthdays, can be recorded and used to generate reminders to you. Keeping in touch with your customers has never been easier.

Don't forget prospects

It isn't enough to get close to only those people who are current customers. If that were the case there would be no growth in any business. You actually have a lot of potential customers among those who have done business with you in the past but have become inactive, as well as all those who may never have bought from you - yet. So customers can be both actual and potential, and you should be constantly stretching out to the potentials.

It really pays to give your customers and prospects ongoing reminders that you value their business. Newsletters, special offers, and birthday cards – all demonstrate that you appreciate their previous visits and are looking forward to their return. Whatever it costs you in time, effort and money to really know your customers and give them service and value that will retain them, is worth it – keeping customers is the best investment you can make.



Want to find out more? Want to look into holding a Customer Advisory Board?

Call today on 01743 249992, or
Email: outsourcing@cb-solutions.co.uk

Visit: www.cb-solutions.co.uk for more free resources!

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