

## YOU WANT ANSWERS? ASK!

“High-growth companies stay in touch with their markets—and willingly spend the money to do so. They know their customers and they keep their knowledge fresh,” says the American Management Association (AMA) in its research report on Consumer Affairs.

It is important to know your customers' wants and needs before you try to sell them a service or a product. If you do not know, then you are guessing. Guesswork makes dissatisfaction inevitable.

You might have been good at predicting customer behavior in the past, but remember that it is not what you think you know that is important. It is what customers think that matters, even if they seem illogical or uninformed. Good service has nothing to do with what the provider of services believes it to be, unless these beliefs coincide with the attitudes of customers.

Good service only has to do with what customers believe it to be. Few executives truly understand what good service is, nor are they close enough to their own employees to understand how bad and inconsistent service is.

Kris & Mary Anne Kowalski, owners of several supermarkets in the St. Paul, Minnesota area, have a fine informal survey format that could be used by an organization of any size. Each quarter, they rent a conference room somewhere near each of their stores. They meet at each store with an invited group of 8 to 12 customers.

“Nothing formal,” says Kowalski. “We just order out for pizza and ask them a lot of questions about what they like and—more important—what they don't like about our stores. They talk. We listen.”

Out of these meetings have come decisions to stock more low-calorie foods for older customers, to offer smaller meat cuts to accommodate people who live alone, and so on.

The Marketing Science Institute of Cambridge, Massachusetts asked customers of a wide range of service businesses such as banking and appliance repair what factors they considered most important in assuring their satisfaction with a product or a service. Researchers found that these were the most important characteristics of quality service:

- Reliability. Customers want companies to perform desired service dependably, accurately, and consistently. A major source of customer dissatisfaction is unkept promises, it turned out.
- Responsiveness. Companies should be helpful and provide prompt service. A business that answers or responds to telephone calls quickly meets this expectation.
- Assurance. Customers say employees should be knowledgeable and

- courteous, conveying confidence in the service they provide.
- Tangibles. Physical facilities and equipment should be attractive, clean, and employees should be well-groomed.
- Empathy. Customers want companies to provide individualized attention and to listen to them. The Marketing Sciences survey indicates that people want to be treated as individuals. They want to be noticed.

Asking questions is one way we learn information and communicate with the people around us. For instance, ask customers what they would Google to find a business like yours. If you want your business to be easily found online by future customers, you need to know everything you can about the key words and phrases they use when looking for companies like yours.

How valuable is customer input? Here is a unique case study that paints a believable picture. 3M's poorly performing medical-surgical markets division was looking for a way to kick-start its lackluster innovation record in the '90s. Instead of taking the standard route (relying on internal, employee backed ideas), a separate team was formed to search for breakthrough innovation that consisted of the “lead users”.

When the results of these two groups (users vs. employees) were compared side-by-side in terms of revenue generated, the differences were quite drastic:

- User-lead innovations had an average revenue of \$146 million dollars (in 5 years).
- Internally generated innovations had an average revenue of \$18 million (for the same span of time).

The results were clear: Customers were coming up with the winning ideas more often than not, because they were ASKED.

Asking is the beginning of receiving. People forget that. Reach out to your customers and ask them questions.

The information you'll get from your customers can help you steer your product and company to the next-level of success.

RO

*John Tschohl—described by Time and Entrepreneur magazines as a customer service guru and service strategist—is founder and president of the Service Quality Institute, which has developed more than 26 customer service training programs. John has authored several books on customer service, including Moving Up, and has just released the 11th edition of Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service. John@servicequality.com or www.customer-service.com.*

