

Looking for new business opportunities - have you considered a customer survey?

If you are looking for business growth then the kind of ideas that come to mind might include telemarketing campaigns, purchasing new mailing lists, running a series of seminars or any of the myriad of marketing techniques which are available - however how often do you think about implementing a customer survey?

For many organisations, customer surveys immediately bring to mind the requirements of their quality assurance standard to ensure that there is a mechanism in place for gaining regular feedback from customers. Whilst customer feedback in terms of their level of satisfaction is important and should be reviewed and acted upon, there is a great deal more that can be learned through the implementation of regular customer surveys.

Your customers are a key source of information about your business and can help you to determine where the best opportunities for growth lie. How often have you considered one of your suppliers and thought - 'it is a shame that they don't also sell xyz product' or 'I wish they would offer that as a service'? The problem is that you rarely tell your existing suppliers this. Instead, you look elsewhere, find a supplier who does offer it and potentially take all your business with you. However, if your supplier had provided you with regular opportunities to feedback these kinds of comments and had acted upon them then your business would potentially have been retained.

And what about your existing products and services? Rarely can you expect to have 100% of the business of your customers but is it 50% or is it 5% that you get? Do you know what opportunities there are to increase the share of your customer's spend on the products and services which you supply and what you might need to do to achieve this?

For some businesses with a relatively small number of customers and good account management processes this kind of information may be to hand and indeed may be acted upon. However our experience in almost fifteen years of consultancy with a range of companies from multi-nationals to small SMEs has been that when we ask these questions, the answers are often unclear and may be based upon one or two ad hoc comments made by customers at some time in the past. For many of our clients a key issue for business development has been the need to understand more about their customers and most importantly to act upon what they find.

Clearly the most important means of gaining feedback is to talk to them as frequently as possible, not just when they place an order with you but even more importantly, when they *don't* place an order with you. Keeping on top of this can be difficult in a small organisation with perhaps many hundreds of customers. CRM systems can be used to provide prompts but the time is still needed to make that call or set up that customer visit. A customer survey provides a process for ensuring that you do at least provide all your customers with an opportunity to give you feedback on a regular basis, normally once a year.

Until recently normal means of conducting a customer survey for many businesses was either through a telephone or postal survey. Both of these methodologies have their limitations and indeed postal surveys are rarely used these days - when did you last respond to one? Telephone surveys mean that you can target specific individuals for feedback. However, in a world of voice-mail they rely on your ability to get through to customers and to get them to commit their time. Telephone surveys also put a limitation on the type of questions that can be used - for example some ranking questions can be difficult to explain and to answer over the phone.

For the above reasons on-line surveys have become an increasingly popular method of deploying customer surveys. They allow respondents to submit their responses on-line at a time convenient to them and with minimal effort required. A number of on-line providers now offer survey functionality, often at very cheap prices. This will allow you to create your questions, set up your survey on their website, invite your customers to participate and then provide you the results as a spreadsheet.

If you have the skills in-house to develop your survey questionnaire and to analyse the results then this can be a cost-effective means of implementation. A potential down-side which you should consider is that the customer will be providing the data direct to you, their supplier. Our experience in undertaking surveys on behalf of clients has been that customers are more likely to participate in a survey when they are responding to a third-party organisation and have the opportunity to ensure that their responses are kept anonymous. The actual responses given can also be different and more accurate when given to a third party – they say things to us that they would not necessarily say direct to their supplier.

For many businesses developing a survey questionnaire is a skill not available in-house. How can you ensure that you ask all the right questions and in a way that will ensure that the maximum number of customers respond? A specialist provider will bring experience in developing and implementing surveys for a range of client in creating a unique survey for your business.

Assuming that you have developed and implemented your survey what do you do with the responses? Most survey software will provide you with all the data collected in a spreadsheet often with pivot tables potentially containing valuable nuggets of customer feedback.

To ensure that you get full value from your investment in your customer survey, time must be spent reviewing this information and then presenting it in a way which can be shared with your management team. If you employ a research company they will usually provide you with your customer feedback as an informative presentation rather than just with the spreadsheets of data. However once the presentation is over what happens to the information? We have worked with many clients where once valuable survey information has been left sitting on a shelf or on a network server until it becomes out of date and worthless.

If however the analysis process goes a stage further and the results presentation includes actionable recommendations for your business, then real value can be achieved. For example, a recent survey we undertook for a client identified that their customers were confused about the services offered. We recommended an immediate review to ensure that our client was explaining its services in a language that was clear and meaningful to the customer. For another client we identified gaps in the product range which were potentially losing them business opportunities.

In order to be able to provide you with actionable recommendations your survey partner needs to have an in-depth understanding of your business and to also have practical experience in the development and implementation of a range of marketing activities. Specialist research companies may not always have this ability in-house and indeed may see this as going beyond their remit. For other companies such as 4sight Business Development who approach research from a strategic marketing background this is where we can add the greatest value to our customers.

In conclusion, if you are looking for opportunities to build business from new and existing customers then do consider a customer survey. In-house is a low-cost option if you have the specialist skills available. However for many businesses using a specialist provider is the best method of ensuring that the survey delivers actionable recommendations and new business opportunity.

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4sight has set up a website dedicated to customer surveys at www.4sightsurveys.co.uk

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