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# How to Get Valuable Customer Feedback

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I've observed that too few company owners initiate meaningful methods for "staying close to their customers". Your company's sales force is an ideal resource for finding out what your customers truly think about your company's operations and the products and services being received by customers. It is sad, but company sales people are rarely encouraged by company leaders to get meaningful information from customers and in turn feed it back to company leaders for making the best decisions possible.

Another viable alternative I've found for "staying close" to your customers is investing a little time and money in initiating and maintaining a Customer Advisory Board. Key customers are a great source of information about the needs of your market and the effectiveness of the different operational aspects of your business. Customers provide perspective and insights on what you are doing right and what you need to add, modify or delete operationally to stay competitive. After all, they're the ones who buy and use your products and services.

Below are some tips for building an excellent Customer Advisory Board.

**VALUE THEIR WISDOM** - As much as they might like to, your customers are likely too busy to serve on your Customer Advisory Board as a favor. Let them know that participating on your board will give them an opportunity to influence the enhancement of the products and services you deliver to them.

**REWARD THEIR PARTICIPATION** - Also offer them some kind of direct benefit for being on your Customer Advisory Board as they are giving you their time and knowledge gained from experience. A nice lunch, networking opportunities, a stipend or a special discount for the time they invest, and small gifts are all appropriate.

**CHOOSE MEMBERS WISELY** - Select your Customer Advisory Board members for personal qualities and operating values they will bring to your meetings. Make sure you are truly open to benefiting from their insights and perceptions even when their views are contrary to yours. Avoid picking customers who are "figureheads" because of their visibility or high positions. They are likely to skip meetings, and when they do show up they'll often have little to contribute.

**ORIENT YOUR MEMBERS** - Orient your members ahead of time as to your agenda items and provide the detailed background information they need. Get them thinking ahead of time by including key questions with your agenda that you have for their consideration.

**DON'T SELL** - Use your Customer Advisory Board only to gain their advice. Members will see through transparent plans to use the Board activities to generate more sales.

**TREAT MEMBERS SPECIAL**

- Provide your Customer Advisory Board members with quality transportation, hotels, meals, refreshments, and meeting space. Ensure that they feel highly appreciated without the sense you are wasting money. Acknowledge the value of your board members and their contributions publicly and often, verbally and in print. Have your key leadership team members and owners participate whenever appropriate.

**VALUE THEIR TIME** - Keep your Customer Advisory Board meetings to two or three per year. Make each meeting count with a full agenda of important issues. Schedule additional meetings only when you are facing a crisis.

**FACILITATE EXCELLENT MEETINGS** - If you are not skilled at meeting facilitation, appoint an effective meeting facilitator. Begin and end on schedule, keep to a vital agenda, review past actions and commitments, encourage participation by all members, keep communications open, log action items, avoid side conversations, summarize meeting results and follow through actions taken.

**ACT ON SAGE ADVICE** - Your advisory board will give you their best only when you act on their viable recommendations. That's why you brought them together in the first place. Let them know specifically how you have implemented their valuable recommendations.

**APPROPRIATELY USE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY** - Members cannot make every board meeting. Think about the use of videoconferencing for virtual meetings. Teleconferencing can be effective for briefer, interim meetings. Use email inventories or surveys to get and provide feedback.

Over the years, I've helped company owners gain increased depth of information by setting up and facilitating focus groups made up of key customers. Small groups of key customers are invited to lunch, facilitated through a question and feedback session, and later joined by the owner and top leaders to receive a review of the insights gained.

Owners and leaders then respond to the group of customers with the action steps they intend to take based on the feedback from the customers. They also let the customers know how they will be communicated with regarding the implementation and evaluation of these action steps.

Having a professional facilitator conduct these focus groups allows for straight forward feedback. Having the company owner and key leaders respond to the feedback leaves customers with good feelings that their feedback is indeed valued and will be acted upon.

If you need help in mastering and implementing any of the skills and tactics mentioned, I'm here for you! Please visit the Call-A-Coach section of my web site for more information.

## About the author:

Dr. Mac shares with business owners the practical knowledge and insights he gained as a small company CEO. He founded Sycamore Ranch, Inc. when 27 and as CEO led his partners and a staff of 100 for 16 years in developing and operating the 50 acre recreational facility. Years later, he integrated what he learned from his Doctoral program at USC with his practical business experiences and began consulting. For four decades Mac's coached business owners in mastering and applying "how to" leadership and managerial skills for: Hiring and retaining only the top ten percent producers; Optimally deploying and supervising staff to maximize their personal motivation; Developing high integrity leadership teams; Facilitating mutual performance accountability and peer coaching processes; and, Integrating his Intentional Business Integrity Process into their company operations. Mac has served leaders in manufacturing and high tech companies; accounting, banking and insurance enterprises; medical and health care organizations; service and retail oriented businesses; as well as educational, governmental and non profit organizations. Q&A ProActive Leadership 888-648-5552 or MacAdam@PALConsulting

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