

## And The Survey Says...

Don't know what your customers are thinking? Try surveying them.



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**IF YOU DON'T** know how your customers feel about you, your business may be in trouble. How often do you request feedback from customers? How often do you visit them? Call them?

Remember, in business, *no news is bad news*. If your customers aren't saying anything, it isn't necessarily because they are happy customers. It does not mean that your slot in their vendor base is secure. It does not mean that you are getting all the business that you should be getting from them.

We all need to know what our customers are thinking, doing and buying. We have to be in constant touch with them, even if they tell us otherwise. The best way to find out what your customers are thinking is to ask them, and the customer survey is one of the most effective ways for customers to answer your questions.

Now, I don't mean one of those simple "Rate us from 1 to 5" surveys. I mean a real hands-on, personal contact survey. Someone in your organization will contact a key person at your customer's facility and ask a series of questions designed specifically to yield the information you seek. This type of survey usually consists of 20-25 questions, and is administered by a person in your organization who normally has very little to do with these customers. This survey will not only provide you with the information you want, but it will also impress your customers with your dedication, interest and eagerness to do a good job servicing their account.

The most important part of the customer survey is selecting the right questions. They must be well thought out, never multiple choice or "check-off" questions. They must be short-answer questions and should always be presented by telephone, not by mail.

The first set of questions should focus on your relationship with the customer, the "How are we doing?" type of questions. The next set of questions should focus on the customer. This is where you find out as much as you can about your customers, their technology and where they are going with it. *What type of suppliers do you want and what are you looking for in your suppliers?*

Another segment of the survey deals with discovering how much your customers know about your company. *How long do you think we've been in business? What do you think our annual revenues are? What technology do you think we utilize?* Some customers have spent years buying one small production part number from a quickturn assembly shop without knowing that the shop specializes in QTA.

One customer I know of had no idea that his PCB shop was military approved. Information gleaned from a survey will prove invaluable when developing your marketing materials.

You can even use the survey to explore the feasibility of adding products or services. (Entire surveys have been done to generate a response to one key question.) Let's say you're exploring the possibility of adding design services at your PCB shop, or you're thinking of getting into a new technology. A survey can help you gather valuable information about the potential market for your new product or service.

Finally, close by letting the customer tell you what to do to gain more of his business. This can turn out to be a blueprint for that account's strategy.

These surveys should be carried out by a polite person not normally in touch with customers. The surveyor should understand how important this project is and develop a passion for administering it accurately. You do not want management or salespeople to perform the surveys, though salespeople can identify customers that they would like surveyed. You want the customer to be able to talk openly about any topic. The surveyor should not push or argue with the people being surveyed – just let them talk. Remember, above all, this is a fact-finding mission.

You likely can't do hundreds of these surveys. I recommend that you do 20-25 surveys with a variety of customers, from large longtime customers to relatively new smaller ones. The project should take about a month considering normal distractions, busy schedules, etc.

Once the surveys are completed, someone must gather and condense all of the information and then present it to the rest of your organization. This information needs to be treated very seriously. If the surveys were properly executed you will hold in your hands just about everything you need to develop a plan to meet and exceed the needs of your customers. Remember that the worse the news is, the more important it is. This survey will let you know if you're in trouble with a customer. Then you can start developing a plan to do something about it, which is what we'll talk about next month.

Please e-mail me if you would like a copy of my sample survey. Until next time, pay attention to what your customers think about you. And if you don't know what they think, it's time to find out. **PCD&M**

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