



## CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Gathered intelligently and used creatively, it can boost your business, Linda Whitney says

**Y**our customers' opinions are nothing to be afraid of. Gathered intelligently and used creatively, they can boost your business.

Ways to gather customer feedback include questionnaires, surveys, live chat boxes on your website and dedicated feedback channels such as an email address, text or phone number on which customers can contact you.

You can also call or email customers individually to ask about their experience. Many of these services can be bought in, in the form of software or third party staff who will deal with customers on your behalf.

### FRUITLESS EXERCISE?

However, gathered and used inefficiently, customer feedback can be a waste of time, Shaun Thomson, chief

executive of Sandler Training in the UK, says.

He adds: "Customer feedback can be an important tool to drive revenues and most UK companies have a process for gathering and measuring customer feedback.

"However, for the vast majority it's a fruitless exercise, because they're asking the wrong questions. It's simply a box ticking exercise, which is a waste of internal resources."

Feedback surveys are often based on the company's view of what constitutes good service, but what your customer wants may not be what you think they want.

With this in mind, Shaun says: "The whole process must be flipped to focus on the client's vision of what drives satisfaction, rather than the view of the selling organisation."

He recommends finding out what customers want before trying to sell to them, rather than after.

"Knowing what a customer cares about from the outset means any feedback survey can be tailored for them, as they will have ranked and weighted what actually matters," Shaun says.

Find out from first contact what their real need is. Shaun says: "Ask clarifying and expanding questions relating to your products and services.

"The client's answers will provide a wealth of new information and the more information uncovered the greater the likelihood of successful delivery and future sales."

### VALUABLE RESOURCE

Never miss a chance to create a relationship with customers, John



Sweeney, a small and medium-sized enterprise consultant with national business support network Business Doctors, advises.

He says: "Finding out what customers genuinely think about what you do for them is essential. If they're not happy, you can learn what has gone wrong and if the same complaints keep cropping up maybe something needs changing."

Regular customers in particular can be a valuable resource.

"Use their experience," John says. "Don't just ask about the item you're selling to them right now - ask about their experience of your overall service."

"You might uncover something to take your relationship to a new level or discover an unmet need."

"Finding out why customers are doing business with you presents new possibilities. If enough customers have similar reasons for doing business with you, you have found a new segment to upsell and cross-sell to."

Social media can be a huge source of customer response.

John says: "Surveys and focus groups are fairly formal and rigid communication channels, but social media allows you to start a dialogue with customers."

If you're going to interact with customers on Facebook or Twitter, however, you must be ready to respond to them fast, he emphasises. Ignoring messages from customers is guaranteed to tarnish your reputation.

## USING THE INFORMATION

Once you've got feedback, you must use it, otherwise the time taken to collect it will be wasted.

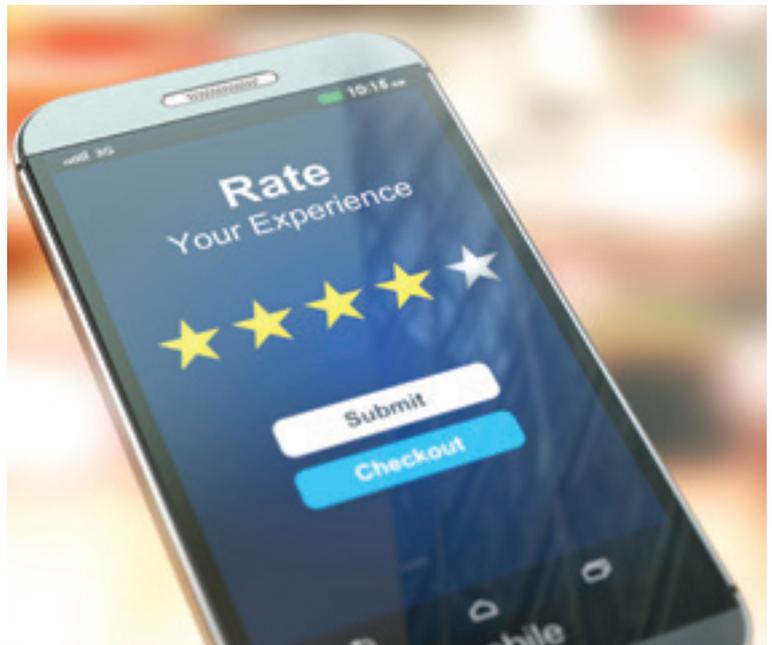
John says: "When things go wrong, look at why and what can be done about it. Look at the process and guidance given to customer facing staff. Feedback will help identify who on the team needs more training."

However you gather customer feedback, organise a way to record customers' views so you can identify issues that are mentioned frequently and tailor your services accordingly.

Customer relationship management software may help with this. Go through your records regularly to spot problems and work out ways to head them off before they arise.



**YOU MIGHT UNCOVER SOMETHING TO TAKE YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO A NEW LEVEL OR DISCOVER AN UNMET NEED"**



## IMPROVING THE EXPERIENCE

Jennifer Davidson, owner of Sleek Events, which organises events ranging from team building to conferences and exhibitions, says her company uses customer feedback to improve customers' experiences.

She explains: "We start by building relationships with event sponsors, organisations that book stands at the events and attendees."

One of the most effective ways of gathering feedback is by talking to people at an event.

"We walk around and talk to people about the traffic on their stand, or the catering or what they feel does or doesn't work well," Jennifer says.

This real-time feedback gathering means staff can act to solve many problems immediately.

"Every problem solved at the event cuts down on the possibility of negative feedback afterwards, when we send out emails asking for feedback from customers," Jennifer says.

Staff record useful feedback on a Google spreadsheet dedicated to the event - sometimes starting before the event takes place.

Jennifer says: "This means we have a record that can be referred to when planning future events, so feedback is not wasted."

Sleek also makes use of several social media platforms.

"Twitter is useful because when, for instance, a conference delegate tweets about an issue while the event is in progress, we can solve that problem as we go along," Jennifer says.

"Often the delegate doesn't even know we have seen their tweet and fixed the issue."

She advises other small to medium-sized enterprise owners: "Be constantly proactive about customer feedback. Don't just assume that because something has been successful and has worked well once that it will work forever."

"Customer needs and tastes change, so don't be afraid of making changes and trying new ideas out."

"Be proactive about seeking feedback. If you sit back and wait for it to just arrive, it will usually be negative because only those who have something to complain about will speak up." However, building relationships with customers and asking for feedback in the right way can avoid this.

Jennifer says: "You can encourage positive feedback by asking the right questions." j

What better feedback can you want?