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### Taking the Pulse of Your Market

Over the years, I've seen a lot of sales trainers give classes. One of the best trainers I've encountered is Joe Bonura. Joe has a way of expressing complex and important ideas using simple, easily understood words. I once heard Joe say, "You can sell the hard way, or you can sell the easy way!" The "hard" way is to keep presenting ideas and products in the hope that something you say might resonate with the customer. The "easy" way to sell is to ask the client what they need and then presenting the products that will solve their problems. The "easy" way is taking a marketing approach to your interactions with customers. I once heard the difference between selling and marketing described in this way: selling is getting people to buy the product you have and marketing is finding out what the customer wants and providing it to them. The key to effective marketing is finding out what the customer wants and the best way to do this is very simple; we ask them!

Our publications have many different types of "customers." The most obvious are our advertisers, the local businesses whose dollars makes everything we do possible. Our readers are also our customers, we need to provide them with products that fill their needs and give them a reason to keep reading our publications. It is our readers that give our products their value, it is our ability to connect with them that makes advertising attractive to potential advertisers. Having a strategy in place to gauge the opinions of your customers will make your publications more effective, more secure and more profitable.

#### **The problem of getting good feedback**

Our mothers are the source of the biggest problems in gathering accurate information about our customers' opinions of our publications. Throughout our childhoods we are told, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all!" This is why we hear things like, "I like your paper, it's a great publication...but cancel all of my advertising." Most of the feedback we get is binary, "on/off", "yes/no." Most people are just too nice to give you unsolicited negative feedback. On the other hand, customers may be reluctant to give you positive feedback because they fear that you'll raise their rates. These factors limit the amount of accurate information available to you to run your business. You are like a WWII submarine captain looking through your periscope: you're surrounded by the entire ocean, but all you can see is the tiny area visible in your eyepiece.

#### ***"How am I doing?"***

When Ed Koch was mayor of New York City, he would walk the streets of the city asking his constituents a simple question, "How am I doing?" Koch generally got high marks for his performance in office. A skilled politician, he knew that his question not only helped him keep his thumb on the city's pulse, but also gave its citizens a sense of agency. People like to feel that they have some input and thereby some control over their environment. There is no greater compliment than saying, "I value your opinion, please tell me what you think about...?" Aside from gathering information, setting up a feedback mechanism helps to build strong relationships with the people who are critical to your success.

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### What you don't know, CAN hurt you!

I've found a lot of publishers are reluctant to survey the opinions of their advertisers, readers and employees. Today's publishers are pressed for time and have to carefully monitor their cash flow to be successful. In my opinion, rather than being an argument against setting up a protocol for soliciting customer feedback, the tough market conditions present a strong argument for doing so. Having accurate information on how the market views your publication allows publishers to avoid costly mistakes and to chart a course toward profitability. Let's look at some potential concerns about soliciting your customers' opinions.

*"This a small town, I live here and I don't need to do a survey to know what's going on."*

One of the reasons that the free and community paper has continued to thrive while many large metro publishers have folded is that we better understand our markets. I believe that we can never have too much knowledge about our market. We live in a period of great change. People now engage with the world using different technologies and their lifestyles have undergone significant changes. One of the biggest demographic shifts is the rise of the millennial generation. All of these factors mean that we can no longer rely on what has worked in the past. Also, the people who grew up with Amazon, Yelp, and Facebook are conditioned to sharing their opinions with the firms they do business with.

*"We are a small operation, we don't have the time or the money needed to conduct market research."*

Fortunately, modern technology means that conducting a survey can be done quickly and at virtually no cost. Web based services such as SurveyMonkey and Constant Contact make it easy for any company to reach out to their customer base. Our industry is unique in that our business is delivering information to the general public. This provides us with a platform for distributing survey questions to our readership at no additional expense.

While it does take some time to create a survey and tabulate the results, it is well worth the effort. Surveys should be a regular part of doing business. As a sales manager, I made a point of calling several customers/prospects every day from my reps' call reports. I would just call the business contact listed to thank them for their time and to follow-up and make sure all of their questions were answered. This practice not only tended to keep my team's call reports accurate, but gave me valuable information about our sales approaches. I also called our regular customers when they signed an agreement, made a large purchase or on their anniversary with our paper. I used these occasions to make sure that they were 100% satisfied with the service they were receiving. I would also ask if they had any suggestions on improving our products. One such conversation with a local realtor led to the creation of a profitable weekly advertorial feature showcasing local homes for sale. These conversations which fell outside of the normal sales process, told the customer that our company was genuinely interested in them and in satisfying their business needs. Though this took some time out of my day, this investment paid dividends in building stronger connections with our customers.

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*“I’m not a marketing guy, I wouldn’t know where to begin.”*

At their core, all marketing surveys look to answer three basic questions:

1. What do you like about what we’re doing?
2. What could we do better?
3. Do you have any suggestions about how we can make our products more valuable to you?

With these questions in mind you can easily create a survey that will give you a much better picture of how people view your products. Here are the steps you need to follow to gather this invaluable “intel.”

1. Decide what you want to know
2. Write your survey questions
3. Decide how you are going to reach your respondents
4. Review the information and look for patterns
5. Act on the data you’ve gathered and the insights you’ve gained

What you want to know—You should always be interested in how satisfied your customers are with your products and your people. For example, you could ask advertisers if they are pleased with the service they receive, with the return on their investment, which programs or product features they like best. Questions for readers could include, why they like to read your publication, what sections they like best, what they feel you could add to the paper.

Writing survey questions—Your survey should be prefaced with a brief statement telling potential respondents that their feedback is important to you and thanking them for their time. Surveys should be short, limited to no more than seven or eight questions. Research has shown that a one page survey will generate a far greater response than one that requires two or more pages. It is better to conduct frequent short surveys than to use a single long questionnaire. Questions should be short and easy to understand. (“*How often do you read our paper?*” rather than, “*Describe your readership frequency?*”) Avoid leading questions. (“*How much do you love our paper?*”) Questions should be specific. (“*Which sections of the paper do you read regularly: Local news, sports, life-style?*”) Questions can be either yes/no, multiple choice or use the “Lippert Scale” which offers a range of responses (Strongly agree-Agree-No Opinion-Disagree-Strongly Disagree). It is wise to include a space for respondents to voice their opinion. (“*In the space below please tell us if there is anything else we can do to serve you better?*”) Conclude the survey by again thanking the person for their input. When composing a survey always keep your goals in mind and keep your questions focused on gathering actionable information which will allow you to improve your products and processes.

Decide how you are going to reach out to your respondents—There are a number of ways to conduct a survey; direct mail, telephone, in-person, and online. In most cases, for small organizations with limited resources, the online survey is the best option. In addition to the low cost, the services mentioned above make conducting a professional looking survey quick and easy. In some instances, using other means of contact may make sense. For example, “bill stuffers” may be a good way to

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reach out to respondents when you are conducting a survey of current advertisers. You are already mailing bills/statements so no additional postage is incurred for either party and since a bill is always opened, response rates are generally high. As described earlier, the telephone is a good way to conduct informal surveys. Conducting personal surveys is a great way to reach out to the general public at community events. You might consider partnering with local high school or community college teachers to recruit people to conduct these surveys. Because they can be integrated into their classwork and offer practical experience, you may be able to recruit students at a very reasonable rate. Some papers recruit a group of advertisers or readers to join a focus group. These “councils” meet every so often to discuss the issues at hand. The paper can purchase their breakfast at a local restaurant and gather a great deal of information for a very small investment. Contests are a good way to collect data from readers. I worked for a publication that conducted a “post-card study” by inserting a postage paid card into their publication. People who completed the card and mailed it in were entered into a drawing. On the card were questions about their reading and buying habits (“*How often do you read our paper? Which ads in our paper have motivated you to make a purchase? Approximately how much did you spend?*”) We then used this information with advertisers and non-advertisers to prove the value of our products.

Collecting the information and putting it to use—Perhaps the truest words ever uttered is “Knowledge is Power!” This is only true if the knowledge gained is applied to improving how we go about our lives. The future of our publications depends on how well we serve the needs of our customers. If we do not listen to them and act on what they tell us, we will lose their trust and the means to stay in business. The information gathered in your surveys should be reviewed at the highest level of your organization and incorporated into your planning, training and policies. This allows you to make “course corrections” in the direction of your company and to create new products which reflect the needs of the public. For example, one local publication found that readers enjoyed a kid’s coloring contest feature and launched a weekly feature which showcased the work of local junior “artists.” This feature is very popular and because it is sponsored by a local pediatrician, profitable.

### **Conclusion—running your business the “easy” way**

Marshall Field, the Chicago department store magnate, was famous for saying, “Give the lady what she wants!” His dedication to understanding his customers’ needs helped him become one of the wealthiest men in America and his advice still applies today. By making the effort to learn what our advertisers and readers want and what they think about us, we will find it is far easier to earn their business and their loyalty. While conducting ongoing surveys may look “hard,” in reality it is the “easy” way to make our papers extraordinarily successful!

*This article was written by Jim Busch.*

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