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Rene Lacerte • Sep. 01, 2011

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As the regular readers of this column know, I like to reference rock'n'roll from the

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Do me a favor, open the door and let 'em in."

I hope that leaves you singing the song in your head as I did. This song serves as a constant reminder for me to listen to my customers.

For me, customers and their input are always there just waiting to be heard. They're knocking on the door and ringing the doorbell. We just don't always hear them. Maybe that's because we're busy doing other things, moving on to the next project, solving the next problem ... and we fail to "let 'em in."

Letting them in, though, is one of the most important things you can do to ensure your success. Customers have great ideas about their experience with you. They can tell you who you are and why others should buy from you. They can tell you how to make their lives even easier, and if you listen to the feedback they become happier customers. And therein lies the key to a healthy business. Happy customers promote your service to other people, thereby bringing you more happy customers.

One of the many things I learned from my grandfather was the importance of listening. For him, it was natural. He didn't talk much; he just listened. Active listening in any conversation is always a good idea, but as my career progressed I learned that there are proactive ways to listen to your customers, as well. When I was at Intuit, I learned the classic market research tools used by the biggest companies: interactive interviews with small focus groups and quantitative research through questionnaires to customers or prospects.

While both of these forms of research can take on lives of their own, there are simple ways to approach them. One of my favorite bosses taught me the importance of just talking to a handful of customers. His experience had taught him that talking to 10 customers would get you 80% to 90% of what you needed to know. I agree

wholeheartedly. So jot down a list of questions you would like to know the answers

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and tools that you might be considering. And while gaining a better understanding of your customer's needs is important, it is even more important to first understand how well you are currently serving your customers.

In the last 10 years, a tremendous amount of research has been done to determine the best way to gauge customer satisfaction. I think the research that makes the most sense is based on how strongly your customers would refer others to your service. You can test this with a NetPromoter score, which you can get more information on at www.netpromoter.com.

I've been using this methodology for the last eight years. The easiest way to do it is to follow the questions in the book (less than 10) using a survey tool such as Survey Monkey. The beauty of the NetPromoter score is that it is simple for customers to respond to, and you get an answer very quickly.

So what's keeping you from doing it? I have used an accountant for more than 20 years and never once have I been asked for feedback on how likely I am to make a referral or what the firm could do better. Given the ease of surveying customers these days, I hope this will change. Accountants have some of the strongest customer relationships, which have been built primarily through active listening techniques like the ones my grandfather taught me. Using the simple tools and methods above will make them even stronger. I am very curious to see what happens as firms start applying more tools to the process of listening. You never know ... it might lead to lots of people knocking at your door (ring ring) J

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