

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Don't Listen to Them

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They don't know. They can't tell you the answer you're looking for. They'll lie to you. They'll lead you astray. So stop asking them what you should do and how you can improve.

Who are these jerks? They're your customers.

But they're not jerks. They're simply the least capable people on the planet when it comes to telling you the truth, pointing you in the right direction and kick-starting the next big innovation for your business. We all assume we should listen to our customers because they're "always right." Who knows what they want better than the customers themselves? But customers don't know what you can do better. They can't innovate for you. There's no way around it. You have to do the hard work for yourself.

If Thomas Edison had listened to consumers, he would have invented a longer-lasting candle, not the light bulb. If Henry Ford had asked what product people desired, they would have told him, "We want a faster horse." And if Albert Einstein had cared what others thought, he would have combed his hair.

Stop right there with that meaningless survey you're about to send out. I'll save you some time. This is what your customers are going to tell you: They want the same product and service you provide today, just a little cheaper. They want your products to always be in stock. They want it delivered overnight, for free. They don't want minimums. They want better terms. They don't like commitments. They want more variety and options. They think your email marketing is just fine the way it is.

These are not the answers you need. If you follow this roadmap, you're going to end up in Newark instead of New York City. In fact, doing the opposite will lead to more success. Raise your prices. Turn your crops faster (which means you will run out of stock ... if you don't run out you're either a brilliant analyst, a lucky guesser or you're losing money by overproducing). Make delivery (and every service you provide) a profit center. Set terms that work for you. Simplify and streamline your product list (less variety and fewer options). And go absolutely crazy with your email marketing.

This is not a call to ignore your customer. "Not listening" requires more attention, not less. It's about knowing them so intimately that you don't need to ask.

Think of your customer as if they were your spouse. “Honey, I’m conducting a simple survey. On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you ... and how can I improve that rating?” The people who matter most to you don’t want you to ask; they want you to know. If you cared, if you had been paying attention, you wouldn’t have needed to ask in the first place.

I worry a lot that I don’t truly understand my customers. How do they think? What motivates them? How do they evaluate their options? What do they value? How do they perceive my company, our products, our service? In all my many hours of worry, here’s what I’ve found to be true: Customers aren’t willing or able to answer these questions for me. Surveys tell me nothing I shouldn’t have already known. Even in-depth, one-on-one interactions can be painfully trivial and misleading. Sure, you can find some valuable nuggets just by listening to your customers, but it’s like panning for gold—you have to sift through a ton of pebbles and not all that glitters is a profitable insight.

The problem is customers can’t tell you what you want to know because they “don’t say what they think, think how they feel or do what they say.” So what should we do then? Our only option is to study what they do.

It’s better to test than to ask. Since behavior is what ultimately matters most, listening isn’t the key skill to understanding your customer. Don’t listen, observe. I find the best observers don’t pay a whole lot of attention to the words people say. They hear the heart. They grasp the “why.” They read between the lines.

Here’s what motivates your customers to answer the way they do: They’re concerned about their profitability. They want consistency and no surprises. They want speed and convenience because their time is short. They want less complexity and fewer hassles. They want to look good. They want to feel good. They want to be a hero.

Those are insights, not answers. And the insights don’t really change. They’re timeless. They’re as true today as they were in 1969 and they’ll still be true next year.

It’s not your customer’s job to help you. It’s the opposite. You’ll be graded, in the end, on your ability to help your customers innovate. **GT**

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