

# Frontline feedback

**T**he two most important constituencies you have to manage as a business owner are your customers and the people who take care of your customers, your employees. What is their opinion of you and your business? What is it like for your customers when they enter your store? What is it like to work for you? Our biggest problem as human beings is not knowing what we don't know.

## CUSTOMERS

From the customer's standpoint, what is their buying experience like: service, product selection, store layout, pricing, hours of operation, retailing, merchandising and promotions. What do your customers like and don't like about doing



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business with you? Don't fall into the trap of believing that your customers are happy simply because they return. Yes, repeat business is a key metric, however, it's a metric that warrants digging deep into versus judging it on the surface. If a new competitor were to enter your trade area and undercut your prices, would your customers remain loyal to you, or jump ship in a heartbeat?

## EMPLOYEES

What do your employee like and dislike about working for you? Is there anything that you do in terms of your behavior that upsets them? Are there company policies and procedures that they must reluctantly adhere to which annoy them? Employees usually treat their customers the way they are treated by their immediate supervisor. And if employees are frustrated by rigged policies and procedures, this frustration is transmitted to the customer, not intentionally,

but definitely on a subconscious level.

Knowing how your customers and employees feel about their business relationship with you is crucial if you plan to profitably grow you business. Choosing to ignore these opinions is both arrogant and foolish. And if you're not careful, your successful past may block your vision to the future. Here's an example of how soliciting employee and customer opinions pays dividends. A 1999 analysis of 800 Sears Roebuck stores revealed that for every 5 percent improvement in employee attitudes, customer satisfaction increased 1.3 percent and corporate revenues also rose

Sears obtained their customer-employee data through varied and countless store surveys. Getting your customers and employees to open up and talk with you is not a major undertaking requiring outside expertise and tons of money. In some cases, depending on the circumstances, it might make sense to hire an outsider to survey your employees if you feel you cannot obtain honest feedback on you own. To obtain honest employee feedback fear of retribution must be driven out of the organization.

Here are a few simply ways to obtain frontline feedback:

### CUSTOMERS:

- Informal one-on-one conversation in the store: "What do you like/dislike about doing business with us?"
- Focus group of six to eight customers over lunch.
- Survey card of three to five questions: card to be eligible for a monthly drawing for free merchandise.
- Employees to solicit customer opinions while at the transaction counter: "What's your opinion of this month's promotion?"
- Talk with your vendors on what they hear from your customers.

### EMPLOYEES:

- Informal one-to-one coaching sessions.
- Annual performance review.
- Annual climate survey.

A wise man once said: "He who is ashamed of asking is ashamed of learning!" **TR**