Use online surveys to gain critical business intelligence

Your customers will tell you everything you need to know to keep them happy. All you have to do is ask.

Online surveys are one of the most useful tools available for finding out what customers are thinking. You can uncover hidden problems, discover unmet needs and strengthen loyalty by showing that you value and respond to your customers' opinions.

Online survey applications make it easy to design and administer surveys, and analyze the results afterwards. Careful preparation leads to good data, which will tell you what you need to know to improve your services, your marketing, and your bottom line.

1 Stay focused and brief

Identify the information you are looking for and focus on that, but don't reveal your objective to your audience – it may influence their answers. Avoid the temptation to find the answers to all your questions in one survey. It is better to use a few smaller surveys to make the experience quick and easy for respondents.

2 Be as specific as possible

Specific, closed ended questions make results easy to compile and compare. Open ended questions may sometimes encourage unexpected and revealing answers but more often lead to vague and unhelpful data. Use them to let people clarify choices made in structured multiple choice or rating questions. Give thought to the options you create for closed ended questions. If people have to choose an option that doesn't fit just to complete a question, you are gathering flawed data.

3 Go with the flow

Pay attention to the logical flow of the questions. Start with broad and general topics and work toward more specific questions. Most survey applications let you use branching structures to guide users to sets of questions based on their answers. Use these to help keep the survey brief and relevant for each user. Save contact information or more personal questions for the end. People will be more willing to share this once they have invested some time and effort into the survey.

4 Test as you develop

Find a few volunteers to test and time the survey, preferably people outside your company and in your target audience. Make sure they understand what is expected, are not confused by jargon or awkward questions, and can complete the survey in about five minutes. People often abandon surveys that are much longer than this.

5 Use timing and incentives for best response

Avoid sending your survey email on Monday when people are too busy and on Friday when they are finishing up for the weekend. As for email generally, open rates are typically highest Tuesday to Thursday. Offering a reward to respondents shows that you value their time and lifts response rates. Make sure it is of value to your target audience but not so desirable that people will distort their responses to get it.

6 Follow up with reminders and say "thank you"

Sending one or two email reminders will boost response as will setting a deadline for any incentive. When your recipients feel appreciated and see value in the incentive they are unlikely to see your survey messages as spam. Make sure to acknowledge respondents both at the conclusion of the survey and in a follow up message. This is a good opportunity to make a sales offer,

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How to make a successful sales presentation, every time

Because giving a sales presentation consumes so much time and energy it should be one of the last steps in the sales process, when there is a high assurance of a successful outcome. Here are some pointers to help you hit home runs every time you present.

It may seem obvious to present only to prospects you have thoroughly qualified, but sales people sometimes believe they can close lukewarm prospects simply with their powers of persuasion. Top performers know that it is a waste to invest time and resources with prospects who are not fully qualified.

A useful late stage qualification technique is to ask your prospect to suppose that you gave your presentation and they found that your service was an ideal fit. What would happen next? If the answer does not involve approving the deal and making the payment, then you may need to circle back to an earlier stage of the sales process before a presentation will be productive for you. You may find that this question will remove the need for a presentation or proposal at all – it is a way to "take the prospect's temperature" and uncover their readiness to commit.

Present only when you understand your prospect's needs. By listening carefully you will be able to describe the problems your prospects face, state the cost of those problems and the benefits of greatest value to them. You will be able to do this in language that echoes what you have heard from the prospect in previous conversations. This automatically makes your presentation relevant to their most important concerns, is consistent with their emotional motivations to buy, and supplies the logical arguments that support the decision.