



Ground Floor Partners

Business Growth Consultants

Twenty Questions to Ask Your Customers

By: Scott McGarvey

Ground Floor Partners

Website: www.groundfloorpartners.com

Your customers can help you unlock the true potential of your business. Knowledge is power, and talking to your customers can help you gain essential knowledge about your markets and competition, maintain and defend your positioning within your industry, and spot new opportunities for growth. Best of all, the knowledge you gain becomes your exclusive property and is not available to any competitor. There are certain symptoms that indicate when there is a special urgency to talk to customers:

- Are you losing sales and don't understand why?
- Does it seem that you have to price below your costs in order to attract new customers?
- Is it a long uphill struggle to get your existing customers to renew their contracts or to buy new upgrades that you recommend?
- Are you looking for opportunities to launch new products/services that your present customers will buy?

If you answered YES to any of these, you should make customer interviewing your top priority. Once you have gained a thorough understanding of the customers you serve, and how your enterprise meets (or fails to meet) their critical needs, then you will be in an excellent position to address the issue(s).

How to Interview Your Customers

You probably talk to your new customers now, as part of closing sales and installing your product or service. Yet it is at least as important to keep the "conversation" going as you build your business relationship. This can be done informally. At the same time, you will also want to set up customer interviews from time to time that are a bit more structured in nature. As an alternative, consider getting groups of customers together for discussions. This need not be a formal "focus group" with one-way glass. Actually, any casual setting is fine as long as it will allow for conversations without noise or distraction.

Here are some general guidelines to help you set up productive customer interviews:

- Your first step is to identify customers who will provide good, meaningful interviews. Start by looking through your current book of business. Select customers who are articulate, well-informed, outspoken, and reasonably loyal to your company. If someone has a current unresolved "issue" with your company (e.g., they're late with payments or have lodged a specific complaint) then they



Ground Floor Partners

Business Growth Consultants

are not likely to be a good interview subject. You'll need to fix the problem first! That said, it is desirable to choose people who will be candid, and willing to offer constructive criticism in areas where they see problems.

- Next, decide on the best settings for your customer interviews ♦ individual vs. group; in-person vs. telephone. This is basically a logistical consideration. If your customers are concentrated within a limited geographical area, it is probably worth the time to visit them in person, ideally at their location. If they are far-flung, you may need to conduct most interviews by telephone. If many of your customers attend a particular trade show or other event, this might provide an opportunity to interview them while they're all in the same city. You may want to host a hospitality suite to attract them and conduct the interviews.
- **Group interview?** If you believe that an identifiable group ("segment") within your customer base has similar needs, then it may be worth doing a group interview. If their needs vary widely, individual interviews may be the best alternative. In group settings, try to avoid including people who are overly aggressive and tend to dominate discussions. A free give-and-take in which everyone participates should be encouraged. The group interview, if this option is chosen, need not be in a formal "focus group" environment. Any comfortable, well-lit and properly ventilated room will do, as long as the group is kept free from distractions.
- Finally, decide on an approach to take to motivate customers to contribute their time and ideas. In most cases, your good customers will be willing to provide a reasonable amount of time (perhaps half an hour) for a personal interview without specific financial remuneration ♦ as long as the interview is done at their convenience. Group interviews can take 90 minutes to two hours, and probably require travel for at least some participants to the meeting location. Under these circumstances, some type of reward is generally expected and appropriate. Rewarding a group of customers with dinner is one idea, but be sure to do it after the interview!

Twenty Questions to Ask Your Customers

So, once your customers agree to be interviewed, what are the best questions to ask them? Think specifically about what it is that you need to learn that will be valuable to you as you plan for future growth. Then draft a discussion outline designed to help you identify customer needs and determine which market segments hold attractive profit potential, while also developing a thorough understanding of competitors. You should come away from the interview with new knowledge of opportunities to use your strengths and exploit competitive weaknesses. Are there opportunities to form strategic partnerships with your customers? Which approaches to marketing are likely to be most effective in reaching new customers?



Ground Floor Partners

Business Growth Consultants

While your discussion outline should be customized to your enterprise, here are 20 ideas for questions to consider:

1. How did you first find out about us?
2. Are there companies that you see as our competitors? (If YES, ask for the top two or three that come to mind.)
3. How did you first become aware of these companies? [May be different for each.]
4. When you were shopping for [your product] and you selected us, what did you look for in vendor?
5. Did you consider any alternatives to [name of your company]? If so, how did you make your decision?
6. Thinking back to when you made your purchase decision, is there anything you saw about us that especially helped you decide to buy from us? (A brochure? News article? Our website? Another online source? Something a friend or colleague told you? Other?)
7. Among the companies you mentioned, which one, besides us, would you consider to be the best choice if you were making this decision now? What are this company's key strengths? Weaknesses? Are there changes about our company that we should make in order to be clearly superior to this competitor?
8. Do you anticipate buying more, or less, or about the same amount of [your product] next year? (If LESS:) Is there something else that you will buy in its place?
9. Do you regularly attend trade shows? (Which ones?)
10. Which professional and trade associations are you a member of that are specific to your line of business?
11. Do you shop online for [your product]? What search strategy do you use?
12. Are there newsletters and "e-zines" that you read regularly?
13. What other sources of information do you consider credible that help you make purchase decisions?
14. Please tell me a few basic facts about your company [if these facts are available from web site, ask to confirm its accuracy]
 - Length of time in business?
 - Size of company (\$ revenue, # employees)?



Ground Floor Partners

Business Growth Consultants

15. Who (in addition to yourself) makes or influences purchasing decisions within your organization? What are the functional titles of decision-maker and influencers?
16. What was your thought process leading up to your purchase decision? How long did it take?
17. Did outside advisors (e.g., consultants, investors) play a role in your decision process?
18. Has our product/service enhanced your profitability? If so, how?
19. May we use what you just told me as your "testimonial" about our product/service and its value to you on our website and brochures? (Be careful to get permission to use their name.)
20. Have you ever thought, "if only a company like ours could do [BLANK] for me, life would be so much easier?" ♦ Tell me about BLANK and how you would find it useful.