

Is Your Business Blind to These Critical Sources of Information?

Customer feedback is your best source of ideas for improving your services or products and growing your business. But to mine this resource you have to convince your customers that you *want* to know what they think. Treat every complaint as a gift: it is telling you what you can do to keep that customer (and perhaps others).

Here are some suggestions for getting more and better feedback from your customers:

Ask your employees what they are hearing. Employees interact with customers every day. Chances are they have already heard a great deal that is of use. Build time into staff meetings to ask what customers are saying. Then use active listening—and coach employees to use it with customers: “Tell me more about that ... This is what I hear you saying ... Is that accurate?” Reward employees for sharing both negative and positive customer

comments, and for their own suggestions for improvements. The reward can be as simple as a certificate of appreciation or a coffee-shop gift certificate for best idea of the week.

Get out among your customers and ask them how you could do a better job for them. Face-to-face conversation shows customers that you want to know what they think. Walk around the exercise room when it’s not too crowded. Notice which pieces of equipment are used most, and ask guests whether there is any equipment they would like you to add. Talk to your weight-loss clients about how much they have lost,

how they did it, and what was most helpful.

Provide comment cards. Open-ended questions get more useful information than simple rating scales. For example,

Five ways to get feedback you can use from your customers

1. Ask your employees what they are hearing from customers
2. Get out among your customers and ask them how you could do a better job for them
3. Provide comment cards
4. Conduct telephone satisfaction surveys of recent customers
5. Start a customer advisory board

“What are we doing well?” “What could we do to make you continue to come here?” Provide a receptacle such as a fishbowl well away from the watchful eyes of employees. You might place completed cards into a drawing for a gift certificate as a way to encourage responding.

Conduct telephone satisfaction surveys of recent customers. A manager—not someone junior—should call both cur-

rent customers and customers you have lost. Speak to them in a conversational tone, not as if it were a marketing survey. For example, call clients two weeks after they start a personal training program and ask how their workouts are going, whether the training is what they expected, and what you could do to improve the experience for them.

Start a customer advisory board. Ask employees to nominate several customers to meet with you over lunch. Get their feedback on recent changes in your programs, and their take on employee attitudes and service. Would they like to see you add mind/body programs? Special nutritional items? Perhaps they have special health concerns. Consider gift certificates to encourage participation.