

Ask Every Day

Everyone should have a coach. National research has documented a consistent return on investment of over 18 percent from coaching. Coaches aren't professional experts in any field but they have the skill to find the potential within you and yank it out.

Mentors are also valuable. Mentors are people who have walked the path you want to walk. They guide you down the path. Many authors and performance gurus contend that a good mentor can shorten a learning curve for a student by over 50 percent. In other words, it takes half as long to achieve mastery if we work with a professional mentor.

What about a consultant—a technical expert in project management? The best advice I can offer is to work on small projects with limited scope and measure results. A good consultant can move you from point A to point B and document the change.

But today, I want to remind you again about the very best input you can receive about how to improve the performance of your business or your service.

Ask your customers. And keep asking. Your customers speak truth about the effectiveness of your product or service to meet needs. They don't have a bias for pet projects or offer protection for anyone's favorite turf. Yes, bias is present with customers but it is far different from internal organizational bias.

I've often asked business owners and leaders about their engagement with customers. Almost 100 percent of the time I hear about a small poll they did over 10 years ago and that was all they needed. Most of you will recognize that in this Information Age, coupled with the power of technology to disrupt legacy products, the need for customer feedback has

never been more important.

Everything can change from one survey to the next.

Ask Borders, Blockbuster or any yellow cab driver about the speed of extinction. There's a 19-year-old college drop-out writing code in his flat as you read this. His App will disrupt what most people think could never happen.

Yes, I truly believe that customer research is lifeblood for a business. Borders was heavily capitalized but failed to understand how their customers were changing by the minute. Leaders of Borders weren't listening or weren't asking.

Amazon is not the reason Borders is out of business. Failure to act on customer trends is why Borders went the way of other stodgy retailers. Brand loyalty has a half-life of about a week.

Half of our customer base could flee to a better solution THIS WEEK.

Here are three tactics for providing a consistent flow of customer input: (You don't need a \$25,000 pure research project)

1. Create listening posts—at every point of contact with a customer, extend an opportunity to provide feedback. How many points of contact do you have with customers? Can you ask a question of the day? Daily input and review is easy to execute.

Survey Monkey is a great free online tool to ask questions and get quick feedback.

2. Develop a Net Promoter Score on a monthly basis. I recommend the book *The Ultimate Question* by Fred Reichheld. Here's the simple version of his popular, now mainstream work.

"On a scale of 1-10 how likely is it that you will refer your

friends and family to our business based on the service you received today?" That's it. Collect data forever. Track scores and look for trends over time. Ask customers who give low scores, why? Listen. Change.

3. In-depth interviews— that's the fancy name for "sit at a table and speak with your customers for as long as they will let you." In my restaurant years, I sat at many tables and listened deeply. And gained 20 pounds by eating chips while taking notes.

Be a doer. Ask questions. Then ask deeper questions.

If you need help, please reach out to me at @. Specify in your email that you'd like help with asking the right questions and charting a course of action.