

CUSTOMER INTELLIGENCE

THROUGH NEW EYES

BY CHIP R. BELL AND JOHN R. PATTERSON



The famous comedian Gallagher (AKA Mr. Sledge-o-matic) entertains audiences with what he calls seeing things through “new eyes.” He proudly claims he got the concept from all the “bring you to your knees” questions asked by his little girl. “Daddy,” she might ask, “Why do we drive on a parkway and park on a driveway?” or “Why is the Department of Interior in charge of everything outdoors?”

Customer surveys are a potent tool for gathering customer intelligence. However, surveys are fraught with more inaccurate fiction and erroneous folklore than all other customer intelligence methods. Breaking free of these mythical restrictions can come through “new eyes” questions. These out of left field questions can yield valuable and refreshing insights for elevating the pursuit of what customers really think. The following are our top ten favorite themes. They may make you squirm, blush or feel a bit guilty; they may also help you learn.

1. If the stimulus or impetus for this survey effort were a symptom, what might be the problem?

"Let's survey our customers," is a request that sounds almost sacrosanct. However, the rush to survey could be a knee jerk response to a warning sign, leaving the real trouble unaddressed. Try the childhood, "why, why, why" technique. It might sound like, "Let's survey."

"Why?"

"Because we need to know what customers expect?"

"Why?"

"Because our front-line says we're clueless about customers' real needs."

"Why?"

"Because we haven't asked customers in a long time."

"Why?"

"Because we were confident we knew what they expected."

"Why?"

"Because we've stayed insulated and probably gotten somewhat arrogant."

Notice how the real issue is management isolation. A survey might provide some customer update, but not deal with the source of arrogance on mahogany row.

2. Who is likely to be hurt if the customer survey results are positive? Who is likely to be helped if the survey results are negative? What does either answer tell you about implementation?

We had a client who stated at the outset of the survey effort, "I hope we get terrible results. When we implement the actions I've planned and the next survey results jump up, I'll be a hero." Self-serving motives can inappropriately influence from whom information is gathered as well as bias how it is interpreted. The flip side of the issue is equally troubling. We had another client who prayed for great results in order to unseat a peer competing for the next rung up the corporate ladder. When the results turned out positive, his time and energy went into crowing about his success rather than identifying and implementing ways his unit could improve. Think of the lesson his associates learned from his reaction.

3. How will this effort impact other customer feedback efforts planned or underway?

A survey is only one of many ways for an organization to collect customer intelligence and feedback. However, given the familiarity the corporate team has with a survey as well as the sophisticated scientific methods typically used to interpret the data, other, more powerful data collection techniques compare to plain vanilla. Watching what customers actually do with your product or service can be more instructive than reading what they say they might do. Surveys provide information, the face-to-face/ear-to-ear communication that builds customer loyalty. Customers do not remain customers because they

receive a survey.

4. How will your customers' customers be impacted by this effort?

Why should the surveyor care about the customers' customer? Because the impact on this audience may influence the degree the customer is candid. When an information technology outsourcer for the insurance industry surveyed their customers (claims adjustors), they received much higher marks on "responsiveness" than what information they knew was accurate. Why? The adjustors feared that very low marks would cause the outsourcer to increase turnaround time on claims processing much faster than adjustors could get information back to the customer. They opted to tell untruths rather than be faced with a requirement to change.

5. How will customers influence or shape this effort (both in design and interpretation)?

Successful customer survey efforts include customers before and after a product or service. Pre-survey participation includes a survey pilot to test the clarity of the instructions, the relevance of items and the simplicity of the return process. Post-survey participation is frequently overlooked. The obvious approach is to tell customers of results and plans for improvement. A less obvious approach is to include a few customers in interpretation of results. Remember that the results of even the most clinically pure, objectively conducted survey are being viewed through the biased, subjective eyes of the subject. Getting customers to help with interpretation can reduce that built-in prejudice. If a customer provides survey information that cannot be interpreted (assuming the respondent is identifiable), there is no crime in calling the customer and asking for an explanation.

6. What are your plans if you get a lower return rate than you can live with?

Every company that sends out a customer survey does so with the hope that enough surveys will be returned for statistically reliable data. There are subtle ways to enhance survey return rates. An actual postage stamp on the envelope yields a higher return than metered postage. Crafting survey questions in everyday language (for example, using a scale such as 1: "they're awful" to 5: "they're awesome") can improve returns. Making the survey instrument emotionally engaging (e.g., easy, fun, educational or unique) all improve returns. However, if you do not receive enough completed surveys for true reliability, be prepared to undertake a follow up campaign via email, postcard or better yet, a telephone follow up. Do not lower your standards for a less than solid return rate. Unreliable data is more dangerous than no data at all.

7. What will you communicate to customers after the survey? How will customers know their input made a difference?

As soon as you announce a customer intelligence

initiative is planned, customers and employees have expectations regarding its impact. If service is poor yet customers value some employees, they may be less than candid in order to protect these employees from the consequence of complete candor. There may be units where employees know service is not acceptable. Fearing results will trigger “cleaning house” or adverse “quick fixes,” some may collude with customers to elevate results. Therefore, it is important to develop plans for clear internal and external communications regarding the customer intelligence effort. However, you must remember that customers have long memories and will hold you to your promise. Do not put your organization’s integrity in doubt by not living up to customer and employee expectations for customer intelligence initiatives.

8. What topics do you want to avoid in this effort? What would be the impact if you did not avoid these topics?

We are sometimes asked by clients to avoid particular topics because the topic is “very sensitive” to certain customers. We encourage clients to find out as much as possible about “sensitive” topics, unfortunate incidents, poorly performing products or inferior departments. Who better to ask for help than your customers? Avoidance of “sensitive” topics may signal to customers that you are less than serious about learning the truth. Make your customers a partner in your service improvement efforts. This will build customer devotion. Give customers a chance to be honest and then give them an opportunity to become mentors.

9. Can customers easily reach you (or the right person) if they should have a concern or problem reported in the survey?

“Would you like someone to call you immediately concerning an important concern?” is a question no survey should be without. This is a powerful way to ensure you become instantly aware of issues customers may be unwilling or unable to communicate via the survey. It also provides an excellent service recovery opportunity – provided it is not too late! Before you begin your customer survey effort, develop a process for tracking these customer requests. Assign responsibility for contacting the customer and most importantly, assign “ownership” to employees for solving the customer’s concern.

10. What are your biggest concerns about initiating this effort?

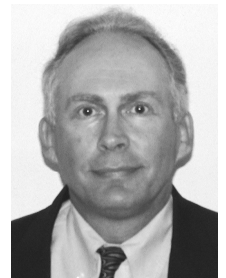
This is a crucial question to ask early in discussions regarding all customer intelligence initiatives. Answers can have a big impact on shaping questions, planning contingencies and determining actions to be undertaken based on results. For example, a client who has concerns

about their own area of responsibility may attempt to focus the survey away from his or her area. They may challenge the statistical validity of the survey in order to deflect the spotlight off their inadequacies. Being aware of these concerns at the beginning enables you to craft a process that yields a valid, reliable blueprint for improvement.

New times require new eyes. Customer intelligence methods are getting more costly as customers are getting less tolerant of intrusions that do not add value to their welfare. Smart companies are those who exercise great care and rigor in how information is gathered and used. Only by asking the tough questions can we insure that the intelligence gained is the intelligence sought and what is sought is what is truly important. ■



Chip Bell



John Patterson

Chip R. Bell is a senior partner with Performance Research Associates and manages their Dallas office. He is the author of several best-selling books. His newest book is Magnetic Service: Secrets for Creating Passionately Devoted Customers (with Biljack R. Bell). John R. Patterson is president of Atlanta-based Progressive Insights, Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in helping organizations around the world effectively manage complex culture change built around employee and customer loyalty.