

BEER MAT MENTORING MEETING NOTES

(15) Customer research

How can we create even more successful businesses?

For once, there is a silver bullet for business success. Sure, there are many important things: if you don't keep an eye on costs and cash flow there might soon be no business left to develop. But when I look back on my earlier career as a marketing consultant, developing research-based growth plans for small businesses, there was one thing that contributed more than all the other research put together (cue drum roll).

Just ask!

It's very simple but surprisingly few businesses do it. Simply call some of your recent clients, say you are trying improve what you offer, and ask what they like about your product / service and what they don't like. Take notes as they talk. Try to write down word for word their praise (use them as client testimonials in your brochure or web site) and encourage them to be specific about what they don't like. Ask questions to get details and clarification and don't stop to justify or explain any problems – perception is reality. If there is a significant problem, deal with this at the end of the call by apologising (if appropriate) and explaining the action you will take.

You will probably be surprised at both the positive comments and their willingness to contribute. Most people don't like questionnaires but two open questions and an attentive listener will enhance their perception of you as a supplier.

Lost customers and prospects

It is also worth talking to your lost customers and lost prospects (enquiries that came to nothing). Tell them you realise there are many possible reasons for not going ahead with a purchase but that it would be really helpful to understand why it went no further.

For some, especially those selling through intermediaries, it may be more difficult to talk to end customers. But perhaps you can organise a product tasting in a retailer or attend a show.

On the hop

At the 2017 Oxford Farming Conference, Ali Capper told a story of transforming the hop market by collaborating with others, visiting trade shows, understanding the profile and interests of craft beer drinkers, listening to and educating the key hop trading companies, researching the 'Unique Selling Proposition' of British hops, developing a brand ('Brewed with British Hops'), selling the landscape and story as well as the product, growing exports, developing niche markets and constantly trialling new varieties and understanding market trends. As a result, they have moved from being a commodity provider to selling a premium product with a four-fold increase in margins. It was an inspiring account of the importance of listening to customers.

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