

SELL Buyers Know Best

WANT TO KNOW WHAT KEEPS CUSTOMERS COMING BACK? WHY DON'T YOU JUST ASK THEM? BY BARRY FARBER

How do we stay close to our customers and understand their key needs and the changes going on in their environment? Also, what probing questions can you ask to understand them better than before and better than your competitors?

Some 20-odd years ago, I started a process of customer interviewing that had tremendous benefits in both keeping customers and acquiring new ones. Some would be audio interviews, in which customers talked about why they bought, who they considered in the process and what benefits they had received since using our services. These interviews would then be played as testimonials and tools to handle common objections from prospects where a satisfied customer became my best salesperson. A funny thing happened in these interviews: I learned why customers buy and what I needed to do to maintain and grow their loyalty long after the sale was completed.

Over the years, I've conducted a variety of customer interviews ranging from taped phone surveys, face-to-face focus groups and customer-run meetings where the customer is invited to share his or her thoughts on the relationship with the vendor. Many of the interviews were taped and transcribed so I could

understand every word the customer was saying and not miss out on the critical factors that were signs of why they buy and what to do to keep them from going to the competition. So whether you're doing one-on-one account reviews with your customer in the field or inviting him to speak with your sales and service team, here are some of the best probing questions I've used to bring out the information that's needed to maintain and build your business.

1. What key characteristics do you look for in a successful vendor relationship?
2. What am I or my company not doing that we could be doing to serve you better?
3. What is the one thing we would have to do to lose your business?
4. What are the three most important criteria you look for when investing in our types of products and services?
5. Who are your main customers, and what are you trying to accomplish with them?
6. What's your biggest turnoff when dealing with salespeople?
7. If you were running our company, what would you do differently?

8. What could we do to make life easier for you?
9. What have vendors or sales reps (from any company) done that really impressed you or made a difference in the sales process?
10. If you were in front of a room filled with newly hired salespeople, what would you tell them not to do, and how would you advise them to be successful?

Don't forget to ask customers to expand and elaborate on their answers and offer some examples. These follow-up questions uncover important information to help you understand not only how to keep the relationship strong, but also how to increase the amount of business you're doing with them.

When customer-run meetings, probing questions and focus groups happen regularly, these reports can become sales tools. Every time you talk to a potential client, discuss how these meetings are part of the normal process your company uses to stay in touch with customers. You can also include a one-page report as part of your presentation to show how previous meetings have been used to help develop a better service program.

BARRY FARBER (barryfarber.com), author of *The 12 Clichés of Selling*, has taught thousands of individuals and corporations how to break through barriers to achieve their sales, management and personal goals.