

## **Ask SCORE**

*The never-ending demands of managing my manufacturing company often leave me feeling disconnected from my customers. What can I do to get back in touch with them and make sure we're meeting their needs?*

Have you ever seen those signs on the back of tractor-trailers, giving motorists a number to call to comment on the quality of the operator's driving? A small business should issue the same kind of invitation to its customers, and not just to field complaints or problems. You also want to know what your small business is doing right, what good things could be done better, and what new products or services your customers want.

There are several avenues for collecting customer input, the most direct of which is talking with them face-to-face in a casual context. You can do this anywhere—at your business or theirs, over lunch or coffee, or by phone. Even a chat lasting just a few minutes can yield valuable insights into why your customers come to you, current or emerging issues they're dealing with, and how your business might help.

Don't put customers on the spot for answers, particularly if they are pressed for time. They may want to think about things and follow up via phone or email. Remind them periodically if they don't respond, but don't nag. They, like you, have other priorities to deal with first. (That also opens the door to another information-gathering icebreaker: "You seem to be quite busy these days. How are you handling it?")

Another information-gathering option is the online survey. This is particularly valuable for businesses that communicate with customers via e-newsletters and other electronic means. According to Dave Gerhardt, Associate Product Marketing Manager at engagement marketing specialist Constant Contact, asking basic questions (e.g., "How did you hear about us?") via surveys is actually quite simple and effective, yet "a lot of businesses don't do it."

When doing surveys, give customers a good range of response options, especially when asking the types of products or services they are interested in or the type of information they want to receive. "Not all your customers are going to be interested in the same things," Gerhardt says.

Keep these surveys simple and easy to complete. Consider incorporating a survey link into your customer signature or, if you have them, your Facebook fan page or Twitter posts.

"It's really about using all of your networks and putting your survey in all the places your customers or your subscribers are going to be," Gerhardt says. "Put that link out there, make it easy for them to take it, and they will."

*This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with nearly 70 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit [merrimackvalley.score.org](http://merrimackvalley.score.org) for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.*