

Ask SCORE

I'm thinking about adding some new products to my retail pet supply business, but before doing so would like to get feedback from my customers as to the products they'd most like to see. What's the best way to do this?

Offering customers what they want in order to boost sales may seem like a no-brainer. And finding that valuable information is just as easy. All you have to do is ask them.

Over the years, many tools have been employed to gather customer feedback, from mail-in surveys to simply asking a few questions after the purchase. The emergence of the Internet-based shopping and interaction has given rise to a host of new and convenient tools such as the online survey. Services such as Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) make simple surveys as easy and convenient to create as they are for customers to answer.

To get the most from your survey, Survey Monkey recommends these guidelines:

- **Be clear.** Say you're surveying on customer satisfaction for a hotel stay. Don't make your respondents guess what you mean. Tell them.
- **Be specific.** Don't ask questions about *general* concepts or ideas; ask about specific concepts or ideas (i.e., being "a good person" is general; being "polite to customers" is specific).
- **Ask a lot of questions.** Asking multiple specific questions instead of a single general question will make your questions easier to answer for your respondents, and make your data easier to analyze and act on.

Blogs and Facebook pages are also good channels for soliciting and gathering customer feedback, as is a suggestion email feature on your website. Respond promptly with a personalized message or even a phone call if appropriate to thank the customer for responding. Customer rating and testimonial sites such as Yelp.com are also taking on greater prominence as feedback sources.

However you gather customer feedback—either using an Internet tool or good old-fashioned in-person conversation—act quickly on whatever you gather, particularly if customers have experienced problems or aren't finding what they're looking for. They may also alert you to a product or service they'll need in the coming months, giving you a head start on being their go-to choice when the time comes.

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 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.