

Do you know what your customers really think?

By Dan Phillips, Signs Now, Evansville Ind.
and Mike Casey, Survey Advantage

How do your customers feel about your sign quality? Response time? Pricing? Do they know about all of the products and services you offer? How much business do your customers give to your competitors, and why?

In person, most Signs Now customers won't share their honest answers to these questions, but given an easy and anonymous way to share their feedback, they'll answer these and more. The internet and widespread use of email have made truly meaningful customer surveying fast, inexpensive, and easy to manage. And given that retaining customers and expanding your business within your current customer base is 10 times more profitable than chasing new customers, responding to your customers' needs is the fastest way to build customer loyalty and profitable repeat business.

Do you have a sneaking suspicion?

As a business owner, you often have "a sense" of what's going well and what needs to improve in your business, but until you have hard data, it's difficult to know where to focus your time and money. Dan Phillips, Signs Now franchise member #74 in Evansville, Indiana, had some suspicions about areas where his customers weren't satisfied.

"Some of my customers had made passing comments about our customer service and said that our competitors "stay right on top of things," Phillips said. "In fact, we had lost a few jobs to competitors, so I wanted to really dig into these comments to find out how we stack up and where we need to focus to be more competitive.

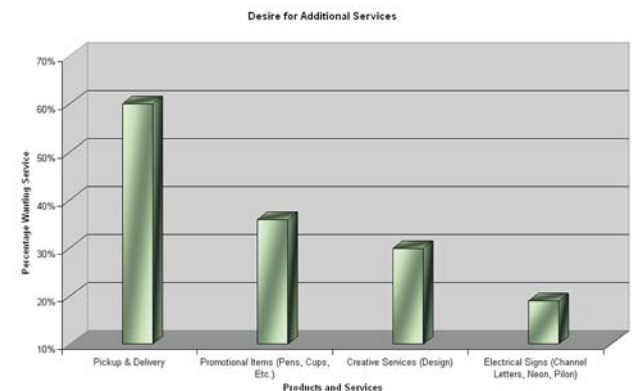
"I thought about mailing survey cards, but I don't know how to write a survey, and no one fills those out anyway. Then I learned about Survey Advantage's online surveying tool. I used one of their survey templates and worked with them to customize it to concentrate on the areas that are important to my business. They even helped me put together my customers' email addresses. It took about 30 minutes of my time, and in about two days, we were off and running."


What we learned

Once you know your business' strengths and weaknesses, you know where to focus your time and resources to improve performance, retain customers, and expand sales. Dan learned a couple of key pieces of information that are now helping him shape his business and grow sales.

"Customers told us that we sometimes don't turn orders around as quickly as they would like; we don't always take the time to ask the right questions and get the details; and that we are short with them at times," Phillips said. "This is a clear message that we need to work on being friendlier and getting orders just right, rather than just getting them in and out. One customer shared with us that he has been with us more than 10 years, and he feels that we treat him 'just like any other customer.' That's not how I want to run

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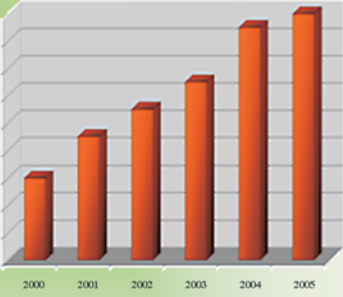
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"What we learned is helping us grow sales and shape our business."
- Dan Phillips
Signs Now #74

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my business.”

Dan’s online survey also pointed to several products and services that he could offer to better meet his customers’ needs.

“We learned that 60% of our customers want pick-up and delivery, something that several of our competitors offer, and that our larger accounts, which are a big part of our business, want it the most. That’s important information to know and act upon. We also learned that about one third of our customers would buy creative services from us.

“I’ve always felt timid about asking for that business,” he adds, “but now I’m swayed the other way and am planning to make creative a new part of my business.”

Surveying your customers often uncovers growth potential right at your fingertips – products and services that your customers just don’t know you offer. As Dan said, “I was surprised to learned that almost 40% of my customers want promotional items. We do offer them, just no one

knew. Now my staff knows to ask customers about promo items. This is a new revenue stream for us, and it reinforces our position as a one-stop provider for our customers’ needs.”

“Finally, we asked our customers about the amount of business they give to our competitors. That was a real eye-opener that tied everything together: our need to communicate better, be more thorough, let our customers know we value them, make them aware of our full range of capabilities, and respond to their evolving needs. So we’re now starting to look at how we can rearrange and train our staff to make sure we give all our customers the time and attention they deserve.”

The ABCs of customer surveying

For customer feedback to be meaningful, it must be candid and specific. It also needs to be continuous, as customers’ needs change, your competition changes, and your own organization changes. Here are some best-practice ways to set up a low-cost, highly effective

customer feedback process:

- Make the process fast and easy for both you and your customer.
- Tie your survey questions to your goals and your customers’ expectations.
- Tweak your questions each survey to help you probe key areas.
- Give your customers the option to identify themselves or remain anonymous.
- Let customers choose how often they want to be surveyed.
- Close the loop with customers by thanking them and sharing results.
- Leverage e-mail to deliver surveys for ease and higher response rates, and to automate data collection, report generation, and analysis.
- Compare results with previous survey results and peer group results whenever possible to look for trends.
- Be prepared to act on your customers’ feedback – they will expect it.

Note: Survey Advantage provides low-cost, high-impact online surveying for small and medium-size businesses.

More info: www.surveyadvantage.com

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