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How Honest Do You Want Me To Be?

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Does this make me look fat? The classic question and deadly measure of spousal honesty illustrates the inherent dilemma in conducting customer surveys.

Just as spouses typically hesitate before responding, wondering whether the asker is truly seeking honest feedback or fishing for a compliment that might be a little untruthful, many companies claiming to be interested in customer feedback really just want validation that whatever they're doing is the right thing.

Frankly, that's a waste of time, both for the company asking the question and for the customers responding. If all you're seeking is positive reinforcement, you'd be better off repeating Stuart Smalley's mantra into the mirror: "Doggone it, people like me!"

On the other hand, if you have a genuine interest in honest feedback that can help you improve your business and strengthen your relationship with your clients, it can be extremely useful. You just have to have the courage to ask the tough questions and the confidence that you'll be able to use the input productively.

When clients ask us to handle the customer profiling process, we typically begin the process by asking if they really do want to know what their customers think about them. Some chuckle, while others look puzzled. But it's a valid question, because there's not much point to simply going through the motions.

Getting a clear assessment of what customers think of you provides critical intelligence that can transform the way you do business. When we get honest answers from customers, we're gaining insight into business processes that desperately need to be improved. We're unearthing gaps in communications that are frustrating folks on both sides. And we're discovering the likely reasons some customers just disappear.

Sometimes it's surprising how forthright those customers are willing to be. I remember one client of a professional services firm who had brief answers to our questions. As we were wrapping up, I asked if he had any other thoughts and managed to trigger a long list of frustrations about working with the firm. Here was someone the firm's leadership thought was one of their most satisfied customers, and he gave us literally pages of gripes.

It helps that we're a third party, because most businesspeople find it awkward to personally deliver criticisms to suppliers or others with whom they have business relationships. It's human nature to not want to hurt someone's feelings, whether that involves answering the "does this make me look fat?" question or expressing dissatisfaction with what your company does. It's also human nature not to volunteer that information. When someone is asked by a third party, it removes the hesitancy that gets in the way of honest answers. They don't have to worry about hurting our feelings.

So let's assume you have a genuine interest in getting feedback and have the courage to open yourself up to criticism. How are you going to handle what you'll learn? It's like strategic planning. Some companies create a wonderful plan and put it in a three-ring binder on the bookshelf, where it's forgotten until someone suggests planning may be in order. That's just a waste of time and resources. Other companies take the plan to heart, using it as the basis for transforming the way they do business. Similarly, you can simply ignore what customers have to say, or you can turn their insight into action steps to address the underlying issues.

The professional services firm not only had the courage to have us ask the tough questions but used what they heard to get better. They shared what their clients had to say with members of their teams. Some of it was difficult for those employees to hear, but they needed to know that how they treated the companies that made their paychecks possible had to change. Soft-pedaling the bad news wouldn't have benefitted them or their clients.

The firm didn't approach the customer profiling as a one-and-done exercise. They asked us to conduct follow-up questions focused on the areas where the firm was working hardest to improve. We were able to ask pointed questions and get useful answers that offered evidence things were improving. In the end, being courageous enough to ask for honesty gave the firm exactly what they needed to become what their clients wanted them to be -- and that's a competitive advantage that's tough to beat.

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