

It Takes Focus To Be Customer Driven

I've flown more than a million miles on United Airlines. That's not an accomplishment everyone would aspire to, I know, but I'm strangely proud of it. It also doesn't hurt that, as I continue to fly back and forth across North America and occasionally off to Europe or Australia, United takes pretty good care of its Million Mile Flyers.

They also take an interest in what we think. I was asked recently to participate in a focus group of United customers, most of us in the high-mileage category. As I took part in the program, about half of me was thinking about my answers to the facilitator's questions, and the other half was thinking about how to apply this strategy to a quick/digital/small commercial printer's business. Your current customers, after all, are your best source of knowledge about what you're doing well, what you're not doing well, and what you could be or should be doing as well.

Broad Outline

Here's a broad outline of what I think you could accomplish by running a focus group of your own customers. First, you could ask them to describe your product line. Next, you could ask them to define your "strike zone." Third, you could ask them to list your strengths, and fourth, or course, would be your weaknesses. Next, you could ask them how their printing needs have changed over the last 2-3 years, and then what changes they expect over the next 2-3. Finally, you could ask them: "If you could change anything about us—anything at all, no matter how small!—what would it be?"

Now here are some questions to ask yourself. Should something like this be done at your shop, or someplace else? Should you be the facilitator, or *someone* else? Should this be done during the normal workday, or before or after? How much should something like this cost?

Here's how I'd answer those questions. If your shop has a suitable space, I would do it there, because that gives you flexibility to add other elements to the event (for example, a shop tour and/or introductions to your staff). If you don't have a suitable space—or if your shop doesn't show well—think in terms of an "offsite" venue, perhaps a hotel or restaurant meeting room.

The question of *where* ties into the question of *when*. I have several clients who have luxurious conference rooms which aren't very well insulated. They'd be great places to hold a focus group, *except* during the hours when all the machines are clacking away. That's OK, though, because I think early morning or early evening might be a better time to do something like this anyway. The United focus group was held in the evening, and appropriate refreshments were served. My own preference would be in the morning, and it's been my experience that the kind of people who are a quick/digital/small commercial printer's best customers would be more likely to join you for breakfast than after dinner.

Cost and Convenience Issues

The time of day will also have an effect on the cost and convenience of this sort of event. I've found that a continental breakfast is a pretty easy thing to cater—coffee, juice, pastries, etc.—especially if you have a good bakery and/or bagel shop in your area. I've had a lot of success with Einstein Bros. Bagels and with Panera Bread, and also with a wide range of local shops in the various cities I've presented seminars in. In terms of cost, you can put out a very nice breakfast spread for considerably less than a correspondingly nice lunch or dinner spread.

Another benefit of a breakfast program is that no one will expect alcohol to be served. I heard a story once about an evening focus group that involved 7 people and 3 cases of beer. The facilitator's thought process was that a few beers would loosen everyone up, thereby getting to a level of honesty that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. What he got instead was punched in the face by one of his customers. Please look back at my comment about "appropriate" refreshments at the United focus group—coffee and soft drinks!

In terms of overall cost, I think something on the order of \$500 would be an appropriate budget. A catered breakfast spread for 6-8 people might run to \$100. If you have to go to an "offsite" venue, that could easily add another \$100 - \$150. I would also budget something for "thank you" gifts for your participants, perhaps a nicely imprinted leather pad-folio. Your goal through this whole process is to project yourself as a "class" operation.

Who Will Facilitate?

OK, I've covered all but one of the questions I think you should ask yourself: *Should you be the facilitator, or someone else?* This is an important question, because the whole objective of a focus group is to get your

customers' thoughts and opinions out on the table. If you're comfortable with your ability to accomplish that objective, by all means go for it. If you're not, though, this is one of those situations where you should seek out professional help. That could add significantly to the cost of the program, but it could also be the critical factor in making it successful.

Where do you find a professional facilitator? There was no listing of that category in my local Yellow Pages, but there was a large listing for "consultants." The second thing I would do would be to call a few of those people, tell them what I was trying to accomplish, and ask them if they do that sort of thing, or could refer me to someone who does.

The first thing I would do is think through my list of family, friends and acquaintances to see if I already know someone who might be right for this job. In either case, I would interview each candidate carefully to make sure that he/she understood my objectives, and that I was comfortable with his/her ability to accomplish them—all while making my company look like a "class" operation!

Bottom Line

The bottom line for today is that you can learn a lot from your customers. A focus group is one way to accomplish that, but like most of what you do in business, the notion of *a thing worth doing is worth doing right* definitely applies.

I think it's also fair to say that most of the planning that goes on in the printing industry is based more on *internal* thoughts and opinion than on *external*, and I think that's a big part of the reason why so many decisions are regretted later on. A focus group is one of the tools you can use to become a truly customer-driven business.