

Your best consultants are FREE!

It was the summer of '83 and sales at our Glendale Heights cleaning plant had dropped like the blade on a well-oiled guillotine. I decided something had to be done right away so I had some very attractive five-dollar bills printed with the name of our cleaner displayed across the front. It stated that the five bucks could be spent at our plant in any way the recipient chose.

With the permission of Jewel Foods, my plant manager and I stood in front of the magnet supermarket on a busy Saturday morning to distribute the \$5 bills.

When the shoppers learned we were from the cleaner next door, many stopped to chat while others offered their advice. We got everything from positive comments to scathing expressions of criticism. It soon became clear why a percentage of our sales had dropped and we quickly learned what people liked and disliked about our operation.

Generally speaking, they liked our daytime staff but our collection of counter people in the late afternoon and evening were “not a friendly lot” and quite often their pals would hang around the store making a drop-off or pick-up visit awkward. Our drycleaning quality was okay... but our shirt service got poor marks and delivery was sporadic. Sometimes there was a full order of shirts but at other times the customer was forced to come back to collect the stray pieces.

Nobody likes to hear negative comments but we must be willing to accept them, apply what we learn and ultimately benefit. We got a lot of feedback during our 3-hour marketing campaign and learned some very valuable lessons in customer relations from the best consultants we could find – our own customers.

The only reason a customer does business with you is because they believe you can solve a problem or meet a need. Apart from that, they really don't care that much about you.

To satisfy your customers, you must find out what they want and then give it to them. The best way to find out what they want is to ask THEM ... not an advertising agent or consultant. The consultant will tell you what they *think* the customer wants.

Right now, you may think you know what your customers want but what if you're wrong? On the other hand, if you were to get a better focus on their needs and then fill those needs better than your competitors, you would own the market. And how do you find out what they really want?

Ask them!!

If they'll be honest and not just tell you what they think you want to hear, you will get a wealth of valuable information, tips, and ideas. And it won't cost you a dime in consulting fees.

Supermarket owners do this all the time. They hold focus groups to find answers to key questions. Regular customers participate in informal discussions about the products and services offered at the store.

The ideas are carefully considered and improvements are made. Often, the feedback they get is a complete surprise. Ideas they never would have come up with on their own.

You could easily hold a monthly focus group around a table with donuts and coffee. You could set up a suggestion box and offer a prize for the best idea each week. Or, you could get on the phone and call your customers.

Listen to them. Ask them why they do business with you. Ask them what they like most about you as a cleaner. Ask what they like least. Ask what other services they might want you to provide.

It could be that they want faster service, lower prices, more value for the money, greater convenience, pick-up and delivery, more personalized service, etc. It's your job to find out.

Years ago, a Chicago area cleaner was running a fairly successful low-price operation. Gradually, a number of other price competitors moved into his territory and began chipping away at his customer base. He had always assumed his customers wanted the lowest price they could get. After a series of interviews, he found he was not completely wrong ... but he was *mostly* wrong. He decided to offer three levels of service and charged accordingly. His *silver* level was bulk service with no spotting or finishing... at the lowest price. The *gold* level was cleaned and finished with minimal packaging at a medium price. His *platinum* service was top of the line with a price to match.

Guess what? Most of his customers wanted the full-blown, high priced platinum treatment and from that moment on, George's business shot through the roof!

For years he thought he knew what his customers wanted. He was wrong. Luckily he found some really good consultants before it was too late.

Take a tip. Talk to your customers, but mostly ... *listen*. You will learn a lot!