

The customer meeting

A simple, cheap way to stay in tune with your customers' desires!

by Jim Danahy

EVERY ONE KNOWS MORE THAN ANY ONE

If you aren't taking advantage of your staff's firsthand customer insights, your business is missing out on profitable opportunities. Together, you and your staff have better knowledge of the business than any single individual could have...even you!

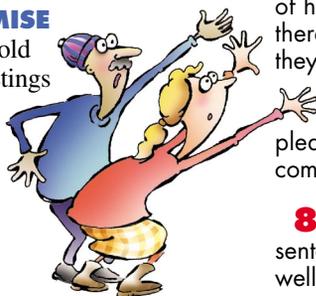
BEST PRACTICE

From the world's largest retailer to single-store independents, the best operators use regular "customer meetings" to stay in tune with customers and keep staff focused on what's important. They point to lower shrinkage, absenteeism and staff turnover because regular customer meetings help boost morale and job satisfaction.

Ironically, customers aren't present at these staff-only meetings...except in spirit, because these meetings are all about customers and only about customers!

SIMPLE PREMISE

Your goal is to hold regular staff meetings about your customers to ensure that you serve them well... that's all.



No customers, no profit.
Know customers, know profit!

YCM

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10 STEPS TO RUNNING SUCCESSFUL CUSTOMER MEETINGS

1 Call a staff meeting to introduce your staff to the "new boss." Use a simple flip chart or sheet of bristol board and markers to hand draw "Connie and Connor Customer."

Explain you will be using customer needs as a "compass" to guide business decisions, and you need staff insights about what pleases Connie and Connor the most. Before you make decisions and after every customer encounter, ask yourself what these typical customers would think.

(For more on Connie and Connor Customer, see YCM's March-April 2002 issue.)

2 Meet Frequently. Meet monthly at the very least. Weekly is better. People remember bad things for a long time, but the memory span for good deeds and new ideas is less than 30 days. A regular schedule is important to prompt staff to collect observations and other good material to bring to meetings.

3 Keep meetings short – one hour with pay. An hour is plenty of time, but less than 30 minutes trivializes the importance of the meeting and rushes discussion. Pay one hour's wage and supply coffee and doughnuts. Ask your coffee and doughnut vendors to support the meetings and give them formal credit.

4 Find a convenient location and time. Meet in-store before opening or pick a nearby diner or anywhere where you can talk without interruption. Let your staff help find the ideal times for the meetings, so you can be sure those times accommodate as many as possible.

5 One-item agenda. This meeting is exclusively about your customers...Connie and Connor. If other business must be discussed, formally end the customer meeting and take a 15-minute break before starting a new meeting. After the first session, assign a staff member to facilitate future discussions.

6 The first 30 minutes. Invite everyone to share examples of how "we" pleased Connie and Connor last week. Nothing grand is required. Collecting, sharing and celebrating small instances of good service are the objective. Encourage staff to notice and recount examples of how their co-workers succeeded, too. Remember, good stories only, no horror stories. If there are not many stories at first, be patient. You'll be pleasantly surprised at how quickly they accumulate.

7 The second 30 minutes. Focus discussion on how "we" can do a better job of pleasing Connie and Connor next week. Be specific. Encourage the group to make small commitments at first.

8 No whining please! Focusing on the positive is vital. Cut off complainers in mid-sentence and remind everyone the purpose of the meeting is to capture what is being done well and to identify ways to do better...one week at a time.

9 Employees talk, bosses listen - ask how you can help. Emphasize the importance of each and every person's input. The boss's job is to ask questions, then to listen and take notes. No lectures from the boss!

10 Boss (you) summarizes the meeting. Demonstrate that you listened. Stimulate collective commitment to action by restating what you heard in both halves of the session. This will reinforce recognition for each person's good work and cement commitments for the coming week.