

Surveying your customers: discover their needs and bring in new clientele.

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You can obtain some of your most valuable marketing information by talking to your customers. While casual conversations are helpful, a more formal survey will provide specific information so you can set up a system to put that information to use.

In August 2005, *Natural Foods Merchandiser* (volume XXVI/number 8/p. 14, 22) published an article by Sherwood Smith titled, "Gain business insight through in-store research." I'd like to expound on some of the ideas discussed in that article.

When doing surveys, keep it fairly short (no more than one two-sided page), but aim at gathering information you can put into action. The following list of questions (some repeats from Smith's article, and some are new) will get you started:

Purchasing Behavior:

1. How long have you been a customer here?
2. How often do you shop here?
3. Where else do you shop for natural, organic and health products?
4. What do you purchase at other stores?
5. How much on average do you spend each month at this store?
6. How much on average do you spend each month at all the places from which you purchase natural, organic and health products?

Attitudes Towards Store:

1. What are the best and worst things about shopping here?
2. Which of the following is most important to you when deciding where to purchase natural, organic and health products? (Choose features relevant to your store: location, parking, staff knowledge and helpfulness, selection of natural and organic products, overall store prices, discounts, cooking classes, etc.)
3. How satisfied are you with your shopping experience here?
4. What else should we be doing to make you a happier customer?
5. What other products would you like to buy here that we are not now carrying?

Marketing and Media:

1. How did you first find out about our store?
2. Have you ever seen information about our specials or promotions? If so, where?
3. Have these caused you to make additional purchases here?
4. If we have information about new products or special offers, how should we inform people like you? Television advertising (which station), radio advertising (which station), print advertising (which newspaper or magazine), direct mail, store newsletter, e-mail, etc.?
5. In the last 12 months, what has caused you to increase your purchases of natural, organic and health foods?

6. What section of the paper do you read, what day?
7. What radio station do you listen to most frequently? What time of day?
8. How would you prefer to be contacted about upcoming events: e-mail, phone, mail?
9. What's your favorite website for gathering wellness information?
10. Have you visited our website? IF so, what did you enjoy most? What would you like to see included?

Demographics:

1. Gender?
2. Age?
3. Where do you live?
4. Other questions might focus on income, marital status, number of children living at home, etc.
5. Do you belong to a fitness club? Which one?
6. What are your hobbies?
7. What school(s) do your children attend?
8. Do you have pets? How many? What kind?

Concerns:

1. What environmental issue concerns you most?
2. What health issues affect you or your family?
3. What support/ group/service/class would you like to see our store offer?

Be sure to choose a person to conduct the survey that has a great personality and is sincere to the customer's concerns. Smith suggests hiring someone who has no stake in the outcome of the research. Try to gather 100 surveys at different times of the day throughout a weeklong period. Offer a thank you gift such as a gift certificate, coupon or a drawing for a big prize.

Once you have the surveys completed it's important to analyze the information. I like to use an Excel spreadsheet to record the results because it allows me to manipulate the information in many ways. Watch for an upcoming article when I'll discuss how to utilize this data. Learn how your customers' opinions will help you serve them better.

Until next time, I'll be wishing you great days, Debby

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