



## **Great Answer! But was it the right question?**

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The M&A Chicago Expert Author Series®

Followers of Quadrant Five know that we are strong proponents of bringing customers into the inner circle. Customers are the best source of insight into new opportunities, competitive advantage, and market strength. When we create a plan without consulting our customers, we're simply talking to ourselves.

When we make customers a true part of the team, we gain new insights into our own strengths, sustainable growth opportunities, and the hot new concepts that are really fools' errands. We uncover wasteful spending that doesn't advance our strategies or, worse, undermines our best efforts. From our website design to our CSR training, customers can guide us to new efficiency and stronger results.

Like any best practice, though, bringing customers into the planning process can present hazards and detours. Gaining usable insights from customers is more an art than a science - it's a process that can yield misdirection when the wrong people ask the wrong questions the wrong way.

For any business owner wondering how to tap this rich vein of insight, here are a few guidelines for getting it right:

### **Lose the Baggage**

The person asking questions of customers must shed any baggage that results from prior engagement with those customers. When the question comes from the rep who works with the customer, answers will be shaded by an existing relationship. The best insights will come when interviews are conducted by people who don't have an axe to grind or an interest in the specific responses that might be provided.

### **Avoid "Yes" or "No" Questions**

Questions must be open-ended and they must be worded so that they don't suggest a response desired by the questioner. Anything that elicits a "yes" or "no" response is a waste, because the whole point of the exercise is to identify the "why." Binary questions discourage respondents from sharing their thoughts fully and openly.

### **Stay Away from Conjecture**

Questions should focus on decisions made and activities completed. Questions about what a customer might do or plans to do will often yield misleading responses. Frequently, interviewees will offer what they think is an acceptable response, even if that response is not likely to come to pass. When the question focuses on an action that has been completed - such as firing a vendor or paying extra for a service - the reasons offered are more likely to be accurate.

### **Explore Additional Relationships**

Questions should cover more than the specific relationship between the company and the customer. The customer is buying from dozens of additional vendors and much insight can be gained through a description of how those relationships are handled. In addition, questions that focus on other relationships can reduce any perceived pressure regarding the customer's relationship with the inquiring company.

### **Follow a Code of Silence**

Customers should know who is asking the questions and how their answers will be used, but it's important to build trust by keeping their answers confidential. Interviewees will be more candid in their comments when they know their identities are safe, especially when they are asked to comment on companies and people they work with every day.

Productive customer engagement can accelerate returns from any acquisition and help the buyer allocate existing resources more efficiently. The simple act of conducting the survey can build customer loyalty by demonstrating management's commitment to serving customers better.

To achieve real success from such a survey, though, the right people must ask the right customers the right questions in the right way. Careful planning and implementation are critical, but the insights gained from an effective inquiry make this a very valuable exercise.

### **About the Author**

Michael Rosenbaum is founder of Quadrant Five ( [www.quadrantfivefocus.com](http://www.quadrantfivefocus.com)) and a highly experienced consultant to corporate management teams. His latest book, *Six Tires, No Plan*, chronicles the life and management style of Discount Tire Company founder Bruce Halle.

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