

Communicate, Test, Communicate, Retest

Business is not static and continues to change...constantly, daily, sometimes with lightening speed; therefore, businesses must be ready to accept this phenomenon and embrace change rather than resist it. The question many times for a business is what to change and when. The answer does not necessarily come from the business owner or management team but comes from customers...the end user of a business' products or services who will make the difference between survival and success or, worst case scenario, failure.

Listen to Customers

If this is the case, shouldn't businesses listen to their customers? They should, but they often forget who ultimately "pays the bills." Although the owner might physically write the checks, no one should ever forget whom ultimately "signs the checks." Businesses need customers! Without customers there will still be payroll, lease payments, utilities, and other operating expenses until the doors finally close. An important point then becomes who decides what products and services should be offered and what qualities, benefits, appearance, etc. the products and services should have. Should the owner decide or should customers decide?

Owners, obviously, "own" their businesses and have complete control over the entire operation (assuming more than 50% of the business is owned). They hire who they want, market the way they see fit, and offer for sale products and services they think their customers want. It's a great feeling of power for someone in this position. There's only one problem. If customers don't see what they want...benefits, problem solutions, price, quality, service, or a host of other reasons why customers purchase, they simply go to the competition...fact not fiction.

So, how do business owners know what customers want and will purchase? There is one easy answer...ask. Talk to customers, seek their input, and make product and service changes accordingly. Let's not forget, businesses are in business for the end user of their products and service...the customer who "pays the bills." Businesses are not in business to solely satisfy the desires of the owner (although this at times seems to be the case). In a competitive environment, businesses must "ramp up" their communication with customers.

Communication and Testing

This "ramp up" process consists of:

- (1) Communication Round One
- (2) Testing Round One
- (3) Communication Round Two
- (4) Testing Round Two

Communication Round One – The entire communication and testing process begins with communicating with customers to find out their thoughts and desires...what they want in the way of products and services sold by the business, what they don't like about current offerings, what they would like to see changed, and what additional products and services might be purchased if offered for sale?

Testing Round One - Communicating with customers is the first step in the communication and testing process but not all that matters. Now, the owner must listen and contemplate what the customer has to say about the business...both the good and the bad...but what great feedback! This information is priceless in finding out what customers like...and dislike. Owners can never give customers too much of what they want. Turn those "dislikes" into "likes!"

After the initial feedback from original communication, ideas for change must be tested. Maybe, the business made changes that they perceived customers wanted, but the changes did not turn out to be exactly what customers wanted. Perhaps, customers thought they wanted certain changes but were not willing to purchase the products and services once the changes were made. Customers can be indecisive and inconsistent when telling owners what changes they would like to see.

Communication Round Two - After initial communications with customers, product and service changes, and testing, another round of communication should take place with customers to see if the new changes are accepted. Are sales increasing, decreasing, or remaining stagnant? Are loyal customers returning? Are new customers being acquired? Are customers still requesting changes or offering suggestions?

Testing Round Two - The last phase of this entire communication "ramp up" process is to test again. Final changes must have the desired positive effect on customer purchases; otherwise, the changes serve no business purpose. At this stage, the business owner would hope that the communication process with customers proved to be beneficial. Of course, the possibility exists that another round of communication and testing might be in order.

Regardless of the amount of time that an owner spends communicating with customers and making product and service changes, the time is well spent. Businesses must cater to the wishes of customers. Businesses need customers!