

# Successes & Strategies

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## ***Customer Advisory Boards – Finding Out What Your Customers Really Think***

If we could just crawl into the heads of our customers, and know what they were thinking. Better, if we could know what they thought about *our* business. Some important questions to ask: What one reason did you buy from us? Do you refer us business? If not, why not? If you could make one change to how we serve you, what would it be? It is possible for you to know these things. All you have to do is ask. One extremely effective way to ask is to conduct a **customer advisory board**. This forum allows you a huge opportunity to go straight to who matters most and find out what you do best, and what you perhaps don't do as well as you should.

### ***What is a customer advisory board?***

Simply, a customer advisory board is a meeting of a group of 6 – 10 of your better customers where you gain valuable feedback about your performance in serving their needs. It can be held at your premises or in a separate meeting room. It should be *independently moderated*. That means you don't get to be there to hear the feedback directly. It absolutely should be audio taped, however. Someone with an understanding of your business moderates the meeting. This is done to generate the most honest answers possible. You want to hear the good **and** the bad. Past experience suggests that only occurs when no one from your business is present.

### ***Why are only 6 – 10 customers participating?***

Two reasons. One, it is important to keep the group manageable. If the advisory board takes more of a "town meeting" atmosphere, you tend to get mob rule. You lose the depth of thought that comes from individual perspectives. Second, it is important to have everyone participating. This can more easily be accomplished in a group of this size. The more who participate, the better chance to gain the really valuable nuggets of information you are looking for.

### ***How long should it last?***

It really depends on your overall objective. Your meeting could run for approximately 2 or 3 hours. The length really

depends on how much feedback you need and the group dynamics. You certainly want to ask all the important questions, while maintaining respect for your customers' valuable time.

### ***What time of day should it be held?***

Again, this depends on your customers. Matching their schedules is most important. More often than not, a breakfast time meeting seems to work best. There are no hard and fast rules.

### ***How do I get them to come? Who should I ask?***

You should ask customers who have a generally positive view of your business. No doubt they've had issues from time to time, but good customers are happy to help. They like what you do for them and likely want to see you do even better. A personal invitation, whether written, phoned or both show the level of importance you are placing on their participation. Many of our clients think no one would want to participate. You'll be surprised. Most will be quite flattered. Remember the goal is around 8 people so limit your invitations to assure you get the right number of people.

### ***After the customer advisory board...***

First things first. A small gift of appreciation should be given to the participants at the close of the meeting. A follow up letter expressing thanks would be excellent. It should note some of what you learned from them and what you plan to do about it.

**Customer advisory boards are an extremely valuable diagnostic tool. It is hard for me to imagine a business that would not benefit from one.**

### ***I can run a customer advisory board for you....***

I have experience conducting customer advisory boards, and would be pleased to conduct one for you. Rodman & Rodman conducted a client advisory board over 2 years ago with its own clients, and we still benefit from it. Call me or email me at [larry@rodmancpa.com](mailto:larry@rodmancpa.com) if you want to discuss putting together *your* customer advisory board.