How To Maintain a Relationship With Your Customers by Learning What They Need

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Is it possible to be so focused on your business that you lose sight of the very people you are trying to win over — your customers?

I believe it happens more often than we think.

As an entrepreneur, there have been times when I've caught myself becoming a little too focused on what my business needs rather than on what my customers want. I've come to recognize that this is a common challenge for leaders who are laser-focused on growing their businesses.

Unlike some of my peers, I don't advocate for "trying to build the plane while flying it." I prefer to plan, which is why I've cultivated some reliable ways to ensure I keep a finger on the pulse of my customers' needs while thinking strategically about what it is they'll need in the future.

Know your industry — and lead it

It may sound obvious, but sometimes it's good to take stock and ask ourselves how well we really know our industries. If we become complacent about our marketplaces, we risk becoming irrelevant. Knowing your industry with sufficient depth requires being diligent about scouring the top industry trade

publications, investor reports and financial news.

Participate in the industry groups your customers value weekly, if not daily. These forums are an excellent source of insights about what's keeping your customers awake at night. They also offer opportunities to engage with people who are privy to deeper levels of customer understanding than you might have access to yourself.

As part of this effort, look to establish and expand a network of partners with the same customer base but complementary products and services. Seek out opportunities to collaborate, innovate, break new ground and co-create value together.

Knowing and leading your industry also means always keeping a close eye on your competitors' movements to ensure you aren't falling behind.

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Listen to your team

Never underestimate the importance of involving your team. At least once a year, I sit down with a cross-functional internal group of my colleagues and invite them to share their thoughts and perspectives on what circumstances they think could trigger changes in our customers' needs. How would such changes impact our business? How might we prepare for the most likely scenarios?

I also look to entrench a culture of continuous evolution to ensure that we can shift and pivot swiftly without introducing undue disruption or internal resistance. That's a skill that my team and I have had to work on over the last two years. During the pandemic, we had to completely revisit our sales approach, given that our sales force couldn't make in-person visits. But because we'd anticipated this need, we were ready with new solutions and innovations to help customers

operationalize the changes they needed to make within their organizations.

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Invite customer feedback

My third and possibly most important tip about forging and sustaining great customer relationships is to "give them a seat at your table." Invite their feedback on your industry and business at least once a year. Ask them what they like about your products and services and where you could improve. What else would they consider buying from you if you offered it?

My team and I always make a point of asking our customers if they would refer us and why – or why not. If they offer constructive criticism and feedback, we listen carefully to what they share without taking it personally. Not only has this approach helped us to hone our product and service offerings, but it's also helped us avoid trying to differentiate ourselves in areas that don't provide value to our customers.

I believe you also have to be open to getting creative about how you gather customer feedback. If you find a feedback channel or mechanism that works, that's great, but don't be afraid to change it or course-correct if it's no longer serving you well. In our business, we're currently in the process of streamlining how our customers engage with our team based on this mantra of honest and direct feedback. Initially, we'd structured our team in what we thought was an innovative way to give our customers direct access to our subject matter experts and team leads with the idea that they'd like open access and transparency around "who does what."

However, it turned out that so many of our customers are time-

stretched and juggling multiple projects and deadlines that they prefer having a single point of contact and not needing to navigate where to direct their requests.

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Revisit and stress-test your connections

Of course, there will be times when, despite your best efforts, you realize you've missed or misinterpreted your customers' needs. That can be pretty frustrating, especially when you've invested time and effort gathering robust insights and data.

Sometimes, even if you think you're asking all the right questions of your customers, you'll fail to create immediate behavioral changes or spark action. Sometimes, self-reported answers can be ideals rather than realities. And, well, people often say one thing and do another.

I find that small sprints focused on testing and learning often deliver better outcomes than major pivots and reveals. The details always matter, but you won't know what lies beneath the surface until you dive in.

Establishing and running a business can be an enthralling and all-consuming endeavor. But staying too internally focused on setting your plans to grow can lead you to miss critical opportunities to serve your customers. So, it's essential to pause often to ask yourself how confident you are in your connection to what your customers need and how meaningful and robust that connection is.

You won't find all the answers in one place. You probably won't find them from your customers alone. Ultimately, a well-rounded view of your customers comes from consistent and

proactive engagement with your industry and peers and constantly learning from those who probably know your customer best – your team.

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