How to increase business through customer feedback

No time to spare? Grow revenue fast by asking clients what

by **Marc Cinanni** in **Guides**

9 MIN READ

L et's start with a story. It's about a guy called Benny. Let's say that Benny owns a bowling alley. You know, a place where people and families go to have fun.

Like many new entrepreneurs, Benny saved his money, put together the

perfect location, and proudly cut the ribbon in front of his friends and family. But shortly after opening, Benny realized there were lots of things he hadn't thought about.

Like too many shoes in the wrong size (unless the Lithuanian national basketball team showed up), or throwing out ready-made canteen food at the end of every day. Or hosting midnight Rock N' Bowls where nobody came. The list of hiccups grew longer and longer as Benny began to watch his business sink into the red.

What was happening? Where were all the bowlers? What on earth was Benny doing wrong?

As his funds began to disappear, Benny started to realize that there were some key pins he wasn't knocking down. More precisely: he wasn't connecting with his business, or his customers.

Start strong

SMEs are tricky. Every day, in every country, in every marketplace, small-business owners are forced to make extremely difficult decisions to keep their business dreams alive.

> "45% of all service-based SMEs go bust in their first four years."
>
> **Statistic Brain Research Institute**

And the news isn't any better for leisure verticals such as bowling (Sorry Benny). The pastime that once rolled for big bucks now has one foot in the gutter. Since 1998, the sport's popularity has dropped by

25%.

Gone are the days when childhood birthday parties and Friday night families flocked to venues for a rumbling good time.

So, what do likeminded business owners do when they start to notice that business is beginning to tank? They panic, and they start plugging holes. Back to our story.

Benny looked at his options:

- *Reduce the marketing budget? Nope, all he had was a website and a Facebook page.*
- *Decrease staff hours until sales picked up? Sure, his teenage daughter and sole employee would love that.*
- *Cut orders for food and other goods? Impossible. He pre-ordered most of his inventory to get volume discounts.*

So what was he supposed to do? Be a good captain and sink with his ship?

No, that's not Benny. He didn't win the Under Forty Invitational by sitting sotto voce on the bench. He had to take action. He understood he had to do one very important thing to keep everything together:

Learn more about his customers in order to increase sales. But how was he supposed to do that?

In her article, *The Three Reasons Your Visitors Don't Convert*, Laura Klein says it's all about making sure you pinpoint the right problem to solve.

> "Products need to solve a problem. Even games solve a problem. Answering the question, 'How do I entertain myself with the least possible effort?' is a serious problem that a lot of us face, and we purchase all sorts of products to solve it for us."

She goes on to stress the importance of proposing solutions so they are relevant to your users' (or customers') current needs:

> "But it's not just enough that the problem gets solved. It needs to get solved in the right way. For users to convert, you have to be sure that you're acquiring users who both have the problem that your product solves and that they like your particular solution enough to switch from what they've got now."

Meet your customers, then transform their experience

A common quality that unites all entrepreneurs is that intrinsic drive to improve their businesses. How? By committing to developing new products and/or services. Why? To stay aligned with their environment and create a constant stream of new opportunities.

That means taking recurrent snapshots of what customers want before they even know what they want themselves. What? Do entrepreneurs have crystal balls? Of course not. But they do have brass ideas.

Mining different types of clients gives you information on their habits, opinions, and ideas for improvement. These precious insights tell you what's working, what's beating down your business, and what customers actually want.

Carl Walderkranz, CEO and co-founder of Tictail, an online community of independent sellers, explains his early struggle with meeting customer requirements:

> "When we first started Tictail, I had a very naive—some would call it arrogant—approach to product development. I believed that customers didn't know what they really wanted and that it was our job to figure it out and present it to them."

It was a lesson that Carl and his company had to learn early: listen to customers and actually spend time learning what they want.

> "...we changed our product development process to start with the customer and the problem that we're trying to solve for them—instead of building a solution and then finding customers that need it."

Lauren Ventura, contributor for Smashing Magazine, sums it up nicely:

> "The best way to capture your customer's feelings about your services or products is to just ask them! Customer feedback is so important yet many businesses miss the mark and forget that the people that often understand their service best, are the ones that are actually experiencing it."

Once he realized that he could do something, a blitz of questions began running through Benny's head. How many people already owned bowling shoes? Was Rock N' Bowl really worth it? Didn't everybody love Hank Williams? What about the food? What's a pescetarian? Were his pricing packages in line with the market? What did people do instead of bowling? Who was his competition? Why hadn't he thought of any of these things before?

More from Lauren:

> "Asking your customers for their opinions, thoughts, and concerns or dislikes, is the smartest thing you can do to help your business grow in the right direction."

After he'd absorbed his new insights, Benny put things into action and came out with some big news. In his next e-newsletter, Benny launched an online customer feedback survey to learn more about his customers. And to thank participants, he'd give every respondent a free all-dressed hot dog during their next visit to Benny's Bowling.

And then Benny waited, and waited, and waited. Because now, people were not only shunning his business, they were also ignoring his helpful questionnaire.

Customize your online survey, get better responses

Getting a customer to complete an online survey without customizing their experience is like talking sign language while wearing oven mitts. Although commendable for the effort, the conversation will most likely miss its mark.

With digital conversations, today's respondents are always a click away from Netflix or Facebook. People just don't have the patience for lousy interfaces and boring questions. Know this when you slap on your research hat.

So to keep potential respondents interested and incentivized, you need to create a response environment that's tailored to your audience's interests, expectations, browsing habits, and most importantly—their favorite device.

Imagine you're a shop owner. What would happen if you ignored cues from customers as they strolled through your store? Same thing with surveys. If you don't size up who's on the other side of the screen, you compromise your data collection and conversion. It also hurts your return on investment.

After taking a closer look, Benny realized his survey looked awful on Safari, didn't work on Android, and the ultimate bowling ball in the face: he was offering a crummy reward for completion. Perhaps his daughter said it best, "Dad, it looks like an old Explorer tab."

So Benny went back to zero and started tweaking. He turned to graphics-based survey software where he could match the feel of his business and his intended customers. Little bowling pins fell over as people filled out fields to show progress. He placed fun facts between questions. Things like, "Did you

know that Lenny 'lefty' Wilkins scored 14 strikes in just 6 minutes at the 2002 Cincinnati 10-pin invitational?"

And to thank people for their time, respondents could now print the survey's final page to redeem a free round of bowling on any night of the week— giving bowlers a good reason to complete the questionnaire and put Benny's Bowling within striking distance of success.

You know what happened next? The replies started rolling in.

The secret sauce of kick-ass questionnaires

Good news: today's web-based survey tools can guide makers of any skill level through the entire design process—allowing you to create experiences that are both beautiful and engaging.

Use targeted media like newsletters, personal emails, or point-of-sale reminders to spread the word to your customers. Plus, targeting people that are already familiar with your business usually results in better response rates. Some say success rates of up to 65%. And in this outfit, the more feedback the better, so those are the kinds of numbers you want.

And don't wait too long to get the survey in front of people. Let them fill it out while the experience is still fresh in their memory. You'll get more accurate information while they're still riding the emotions of their

visit.

Next, make sure your survey isn't too long.

Since many users now turn to handheld devices to read and share information, anything that requires an investment of dedicated, distraction-free time needs to be succinct and quick to get done. In a recent piece proclaiming the death of the long survey, Ray Poynter says that anything that takes over 20 minutes to complete "is a dead man walking". For straightforward questionnaires used in small businesses, cut that number in half. Think in terms of ten questions maximum.

But how should you word the survey? What are some of the questions you should ask? Just remember that when polling for feedback, use questions that measure a customer's attitude towards the specific aspects of your business that you've tagged for improvement. For instance:

- *On a scale of 'bored to thrilled,' how happy are you with the country music we play? Or,*

- *From the options below, tell us why you've never checked out our Rock N' Bowl.*

Another tip to keep participants engaged from start to finish is the use of dynamic tools. Whether it's setting a more conversational tone to your questions, extending your branding colors to your questionnaire, or applying visual assets like images to up the entertainment value, look at your feedback survey as an inviting digital conversation between you and your customers. And like meeting with anyone that's about to give you money, look your best, sound your best, and provide them with a memorable experience.

Lastly, thank them. Communicate the importance of their precious

feedback. Tell them how their answers will impact your business. And bribe them. Give them a reward for their time that's relevant to their needs.

Little by little, our friend Benny began to learn about his business. He learned that 78% of his clientele aged 18 to 24 weren't interested in Rock N' Bowl on Friday nights. So he brought in a deejay and changed the format to "Dubstep Bowl".

He learned that his three-course dinner was too heavy for the after-work crowd. So he grew early-evening business by 12% by serving hors d'oeuvres and high balls during his newly-named "Happy Hour on the Hardwood".

And that fickle weekend slot? He discovered that he was competing with three major activities: church, videogames, and organized sports. So he created "Benny's Brunch" to give families price-friendly packages that combine a round of matinée bowling with full-on breakfast.

Now the shoes. By getting sizes upfront when people reserved their slots online, he could plan the footwear situation and carry just the right number of beautiful bowling shoes.

Staying the course with continuous customer feedback

So where do business owners like Benny go from here? First, it's crucial to follow up with customers every few months to see whether things have improved. Reaching a high level of customer satisfaction means keeping close tabs at regular intervals. So survey often. Best practice points to polling every three to six months, then again in one year's time. This also lets you gauge the popularity of your new perks, products, and services.

In Benny's case, he can measure interest for his new events or onsite innovations. That way, he stays ahead of the game for new ideas like providing instant replays to customers' social media feeds.

Look at it this way: on top of measuring customer satisfaction, a survey gives you a sneak peek into the future by judging what could work for your business—balancing the need to keep in touch with clients while measuring against overarching growth objectives.

And the end result for Benny? Precious peace of mind. Sitting back, he can now watch his business knock down the pain points to success, one pin at a time.

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