



BRING THEM IN!

7 Essential Tips on Customer Forums
FOR DEEPER INSIGHTS

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The Engagement Method

'TURN YOUR DATABASE INTO A CONVERSATION!'





Life used to be simpler when you could just run a survey, whether on email, paper, phone or online, to collect stats for decision-making. With maybe occasional (and expensive) focus groups for a more in-depth discussion.

Now, digital & social media have changed the game! While on the surface it seems easier to reach customers, it's actually a lot harder to get their attention for long enough to develop a meaningful dialogue.

Where you can move them through your sales funnel, gather useful information, and ultimately extend their Customer Lifetime Value.

In these **7 Essential Tips** I'll discuss how to turn your followers & database into an engaging & entertaining conversation, beyond a boring survey.

Where you can uncover deeper, actionable insights into the Why? of your burning issues. And build the relationship at the same time.

1

UPGRADE YOUR CONTACTS TO CUSTOMER-FORUM PERMISSIONS



You may have your customer contact details, from top-tier to social media followers, and even those that occasionally visit. Whether they're in one database, from which you can segment & select, or in individual lists doesn't really matter.

But further zeroing in on those who really want to be involved in giving you insights, will make it much easier to tap into your active opinion-leaders, and micro-target future projects.

“ *It's easier to love a brand when the brand loves you back.* ”
SETH GODIN

One direct, tangible way is to invite people to join a **Customer Forum**, positioned as an exclusive, VIP/Insiders or Advisory group. Where they can have their say, chat with others & see their opinions, making a difference to your decision-making. And you can tap into it anytime.

Sharing with other customers is a critical improvement on traditional surveys. Where you may have open-ended verbatims for Why? questions, but there's little engagement & retention value, as they're submitted in complete isolation from others. As humans, we're wired for primal, social interaction.

HOT-TIP

Social media pages are not good enough for quality insights. The environment is very cluttered and distracting. You're at the mercy of their ever-changing algorithms, have no real ownership of the database, and no profiling of who's making the comments.

2

SEGMENT YOUR CUSTOMER-FORUM MEMBERS



The key to any research activity, is to make it targeted & relevant, to prevent drop-outs and non-returns in future. A forum chat-topic that doesn't apply to a particular person is a turn-off, and more complicated in reporting.

The big advantage of having an insights-database is the ability to filter prospects across a number of variables to target invitations. Much easier to decide on topics with specifics, rather than generalities, and be really hard-hitting & direct in your conversation-starters.

“ *Even when you are marketing to your entire audience or customer base, you are still simply speaking to a single human at any given time.*

ANN HANDLEY

”

This also helps avoid one of the major irritants, which is being asked the same information each time. Your customers love to help, but familiarity breeds contempt, and romance quickly fades with the same old. Once you capture new information about someone, store it, and never have to ask it again within a reasonable time, such as every 12 months.

HOT TIP

Tag forum members by their stage in your marketing funnel and their Customer Experience preferences, as a useful way of framing more direct and productive topics.

3

DON'T ASK QUESTIONS!

What sounds contradictory for an insights program, is at the heart of upgrading from surveys to a Customer-Forum. The ideal conversation-starter can't be answered with a Yes or No.

Just like having a chat with friends over coffee, you want the ideas to flow, as you build on what someone else has said. It would be a very boring catch-up with all one-word answers, and little insight into how everyone was feeling.



“ I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. ”
MAYA ANGELOU

It's similar to how a journalist runs an interview, but friendlier. The six basics of Who, What, When, Where, How, Why? E.g. “How do you feel about___?” as an opening line.

The upside of the social media age is that people are conditioned to chat and tell stories in short, sharp, but emotionally-revealing bites. Provided of course, that they feel involved.

HOT TIP

Share a decision-making dilemma with your customers. “I'm trying to decide whether to do X or Y? What do you think?” They're guaranteed to tell you directly and honestly.

4

MAKE IT FUN & FRIENDLY



Whatever your category, you're there to make every customer interaction an event. Apply entertainment values and you'll have a more engaged conversation and deeper insights. If the process is dry & boring like traditional research, the outcome will be the same.

People now prefer to interact with brands in their natural habitat, round the digital campfire of social channels on mobile.

“ *Amazing things will happen when you listen to the consumer.* ”
JONATHAN MIDENHALL, CMO OF AIRBNB

Imagine if you could post a link directly from your page to a social-style Chat Room, have a quick conversation, and capture opt-in contact details for future projects. Keeping brand consistency all the way through.

Customers control the conversation and will no longer engage with faceless researchers and aloof brands with no human contact. WIIFM (What's In It For Me) is the mantra for marketing touchpoints, and a Customer-Forum is no exception.

Words matter! They're not 'respondents' they're your Guests, and the 'moderator' is the Host. Take out the academic research terms, and replace them with event-marketing language.

HOT TIP

Use a brand ambassador, The Boss, or a frontline team member as the 'face' of your Customer Forum program. All they have to do is approve using their name & image to endorse chat session invitations.

5

INCENTIVISE CREATIVELY

Yes, customers want to help you, but it's only fair to respect their time taken to chat. But you don't have to break the budget. Cash/gift cards are always popular, because they can buy what they like.

But in the spirit of treating insights gathering as a marketing touch point, think about how you would approach this more creatively as a customer event.

Think about a 'money can't buy' experience you can offer, that's unique to your business. With great potential for sharing by the winner and on your own social pages.



“ *Creativity may well be the last legal unfair competitive advantage we can take to run over the competition.*

DAVE TROTT

”

Depending on the size of your Customer-Forum group, it may be unrealistic to give something to everyone. Otherwise it'll just feel like a 'free pen'. Instead, I've found a prize draw of one major and say three secondary items can be effective.

One really big prize can feel unattainable, like a lottery. But multiple smaller gifts feel friendlier and more within reach. So you might have an exclusive customer experience as the major, and merchandise as secondaries.

HOT TIP

Customers lose faith when a promised incentive takes too long in fulfilment, and word-of-mouth will be damaging. Announce winners no more than 7 days after close of survey, and deliver the goods at the same time.

6

FOLLOW-UP & SHAREBACK



Your Customer-Forum is a Brand-Advocate relationship-builder, as well as a source of information. A thank-you email is essential for starters, but once the results have been analysed, share an update like “Thanks to your valuable input we’ve made these changes ...”.

You don’t have to compromise commercial-confidence in public. But how much better is it to position improvements as being customer -driven. “You told us you wanted ...”, and not just an edict from on high. Both for participants at a personal level, and non-participants in wider marketing.

“ *Thanks for letting us have our say, again another thing that makes this feel like a community and not just a number in a rating.* ”
cliizii GUEST-PARTICIPANT

It used to be a research trade secret. People pissed off with being treated like cattle, voting with their feet away from survey panels. But now concerned rumblings have turned into critical recommendations to treat research like marketing.

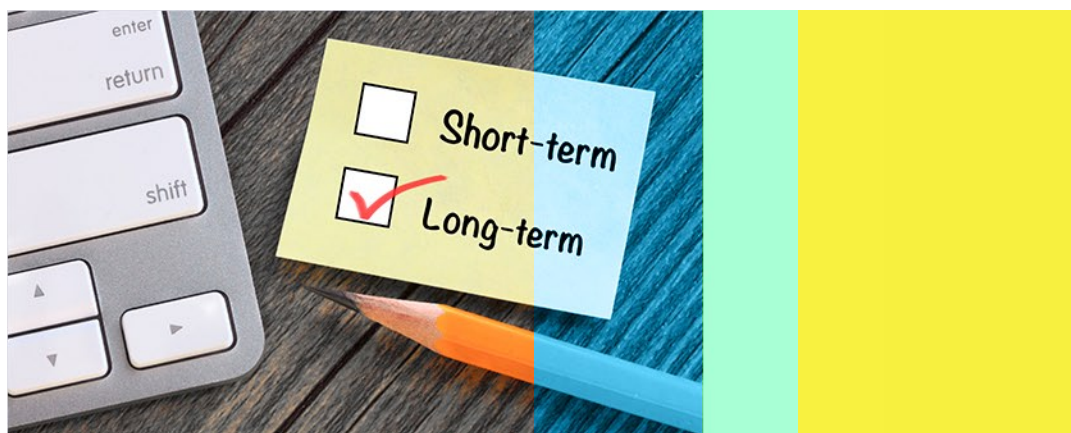
Not to hard-sell a message, but use the same visual, social, mobile, personalised engagement tools to have a two-way conversation with customers.

HOT TIP

Think of the ‘feedback’ loop as ‘shareback’. WIIFM for a customer can be as simple as knowing how they made a tangible difference to their favourite brand.

7

RELATIONSHIPS ARE NOT A ONE-NIGHT STAND



Research is often seen as a one-off exercise, because traditionally time & expense can be prohibitive. And as mentioned, treated totally separately to marketing. But the major advantage of the agile Customer-Forum approach, marrying insights gathering with relationships, is that actionable feedback can be accessed virtually any time during the year.

You may want customer input to shape a new initiative, or an overnight dipstick on how to handle a PR bush-fire. Once recruited, your 'insights strike team' will always be ready to jump onboard to help. As long as you periodically reach out, follow-up and shareback.

“ I have this perception that my friends are the consumer, and if it doesn't work on them, then I'm not doing it. ”
RHIANNA

Your forum management system needs to keep track of how often you're sending invitations, how people are responding, the quality of their contributions to chat sessions, and other notes. This way, over time you can filter out those who end up not contributing at all. And focus on those who are more productive.

HOT TIP

Customers love being brand 'insiders', receiving exclusive information before everyone else, and access to special experiences.

BONUS TIP

QUALITY BEATS QUANTITY

While it's wise not to over-react to a one-off comment, a focussed discussion between a small group of loyal customers, can reveal actionable insights you won't get from a larger number of disengaged respondents on a tick-boxes survey form.

A Customer-Forum of even just 8-12 Guests in a session, like the standard focus-group, can yield pages of rich material for decision-making. IF they're the right conversation-starters.



THE TAKEAWAY

It can be fast, easy, and very affordable to run an ongoing Customer-Forum program. To gather deeper insights for better decision-making, and build stronger relationships with your most active 'fans'.

You don't have to tackle a beast of a high-end 'brand community' platform that demands a minimum 6 figure annual budget, and full-time staff to maintain it.

What you do need are engagement values & shareback. Making it fun & friendly, with customers feeling part of the decision-making at your brand.

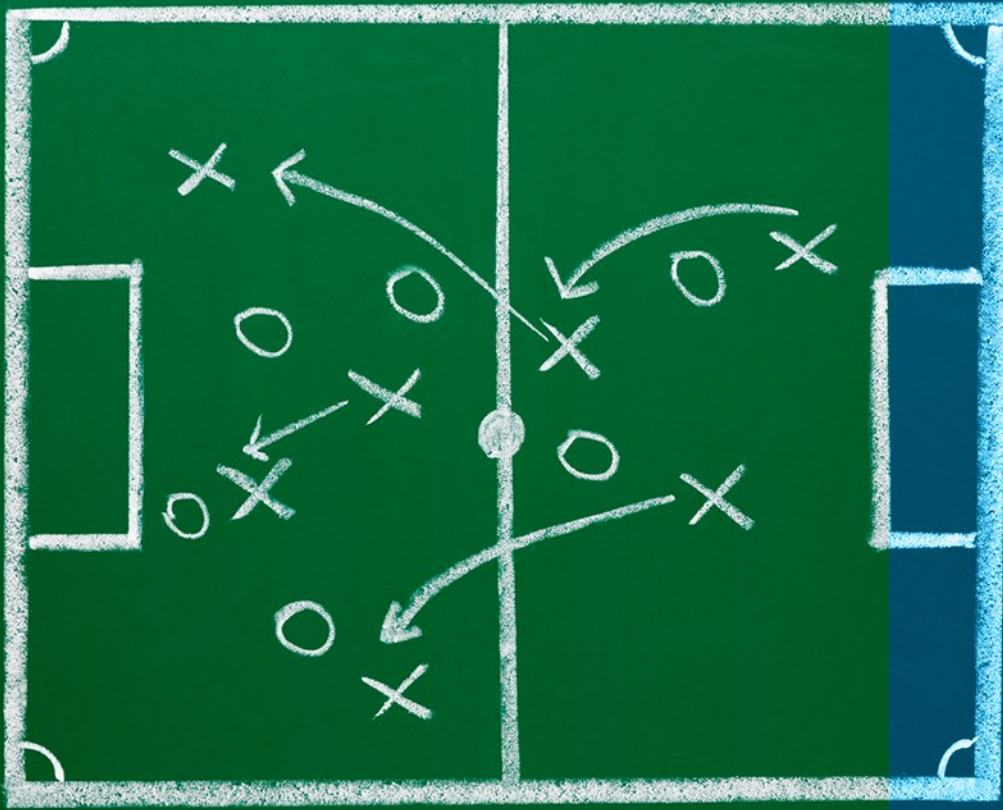


“ Here we are now, entertain us ”
NIRVANA

TIP-SHEET SUMMARY

- 1 Upgrade your contacts to Customer-Forum permissions
- 2 Segment your Customer-Forum members
- 3 Don't ask questions!
- 4 Make it fun & friendly
- 5 Incentivise creatively
- 6 Follow-up & shareback
- 7 Relationships are not a one-night stand

BONUS TIP Quality beats quantity



HOT TIP ACTION LIST

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eriks Celmins brings a wealth of global experience in talking to media & entertainment audiences, as a long-time research & content consultant.

Eriks has conducted both in-depth quantitative & qualitative research, including his innovative techniques for participant engagement.



He passionately believes in the power of conversation to build audience relationships, and help content & marketing teams gather fast, real-time insights.

He is the mind behind The Engagement Method - market research that actually creates Raving Fans. As well as his own social style, private chat platform **cliizii** ... **C**ustomer **L**ed Insights made easy!

Full Member of AMSRS (Australian Market & Social Research Society).



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People First Research