

Making Customers More Than Your Top "Priority"

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Recently, my firm was conducting training at a regional sales meeting of a big conglomerate. Our goal was to establish cross-divisional lead-sharing as a part of the company culture and to get everyone to understand how big of a win-win that practice can be.

We devoted a big chunk of the day to active and quite fruitful lead-sharing. First, we got everyone in the mood, thinking about the importance of generosity to their success so they would be primed to share their leads with each other. This was pretty easy, frankly. The group really got it.

Then we asked them to look into their own backyards, the people they already knew through personal or business connections. It's always best to start with your closest relationships, because after all, a referral is only as good as the strength of relationship you have with the referrer. When everyone began naming the groups of people they already knew who might be able to provide sales leads, all sorts of constituencies popped up: family, friends, classmates and faculty from back in business school or college, professional service providers, suppliers, and the list goes on.

Ten or 15 minutes passed before someone realized that in the group's blind spot still sat one vital constituency, perhaps the most important and also, sadly, perhaps the most often overlooked. Customers!

When we're trying to generate great sales leads, why don't we think of our current customers? We hear everyone say, "Our existing customers are our top priority." I think we should make our customers our top generators of sales leads, too!

Who is the most knowledgeable about the value of your products or services because they actually use your products and services? Your customers.

Who is the most aware of other organizations who have similar needs as your customers? That's right. Your customers.

Who is the most concerned for your business success? Your investors, of course,

then your customers, because their lives are easier if you, one of their suppliers, stay in business.

So when you sell and deliver products or services -- in my company's case, it might be marketing consulting, corporate training or big conference seminars or facilitation -- you should be sure to do the following two things.

- Ask for testimonials. (This is an easy win, and if you're already doing it, good job.) You will be amazed how many people will say, "Of course I'll provide a testimonial."
- Ask for referrals. "Who do you know who might benefit from the work we do?" Furthermore, ask right when your customers buy from you. I think the point of sale is a really great time to ask because it's often one of the high points of the relationship (hopefully not the peak, but certainly a high point). At the point of sale, our customers are feeling confident, smart, happy, and excited about their buying decision and their investment and trust in us. If they weren't feeling that, they wouldn't have signed the dotted line.

Since the inception of my firm's program with the conglomerate's sales teams I mentioned above, our client has found more than \$55 million of new closed work and has generated nearly \$500 million of leads for its pipeline -- all resulting from the systematizing of internal referrals between the company's sales divisions. The client's sales teams' new collaboration has produced great success so far, but I think the success will be even greater if they start making their customers more than their top "priority."

We should make our customers our top referrers, too. All it takes is checking that silly blind spot every month or so and having the guts to ask.