



## ***Your Customers Have More to Say Than You Might Think***

**Jim Laber, Partner  
AtNetPlus, Inc.**

All you have to do is talk to them... sounds obvious doesn't it? Well, if you are like us – other than handling a request, a problem, or getting the occasional 'atta boy' we don't often take the time to genuinely talk to our clients about our services. That recently changed when we held our first 'Customer Advisory Team' luncheon where we finally made the time to find out what our customers are really thinking.

What a revelation. When we first decided to do this we thought we would have to beg our clients to attend. After all, they already had enough to do without spending time helping us improve, right? Wrong. It turns out they were eager to participate and those that couldn't attend wanted to make sure we invited them to the next one.

We also thought it would be tough to get them to provide the kind of feedback that would help us truly enhance our customer service. Wrong again. We were determined to make the most of this opportunity. So, about a week ahead of time, we sent everyone that planned to attend a list of topics that we wanted to chat about during the luncheon. The idea was to add structure to the discussion and to provide plenty of time for them to reflect on the specific areas about which we wanted their input.

For example, as an IT services provider, we wanted to enhance how we record service requests from our clients. We also wanted their opinion on changes we were considering that would reduce the amount of detail shown on invoices. Our clients came prepared with useful suggestions and clear opinions about what we are currently doing right, the changes we wanted to make, and other ways we could become even more helpful to them.

When it was over we had a punch list of items to incorporate into our everyday business practices. Many of the items would have had a much lower priority had we not received input from our clients. As a matter of fact, based on their feedback, we decided not to do some things that we had been planning such as taking the detail off of our invoices.

Finally, we thought that we'd do this once or maybe twice a year. Wrong yet again. Our customers made it very clear that they thought this should be a quarterly event. They even gave us suggestions for improving the event itself! We are already planning the next luncheon for February. It should be even more productive than the first one – after all, our clients already told us how to make it better.

If you've ever thought about getting your customers together but have been hesitant, my advice is to go for it. They will appreciate your efforts and you will come away with a better understanding of them and what they need from your business. I'll even make it easier for you to get started by providing some helpful suggestions for a successful customer advisory team event... direct from our clients to you!

## 13 Helpful Hints for a Successful Customer Advisory Team Luncheon

1. Ask a wide variety of clients. Include people that are representative of your full customer base – big, small, different industries, occasional buyers, and your best clients.
2. Prepare an agenda/list of topics about which you want input. Send it out ahead of time to give attendees plenty of time to mull them over before they arrive.
3. Have a moderator that speaks for your company. This person should be prepared to discuss everything on the agenda.
4. Ask clients that may not be your biggest fans – if you want to improve you need to know why a customer is unhappy. Don't be afraid to listen to them but prepare the moderator to keep the conversation moving and not allow it to disintegrate into a gripe session.
5. Send written invitations via US Mail. Our response rate from the physical invitations was three times that from Email.
6. Hold the event at a neutral location and limit the number of employees that attend. The focus should be on your customers. It is important that they don't feel overwhelmed by your staff.
7. Remind everyone from you office that does attend that this is not the place for rebuttals or defensiveness. This event is about *listening* to your clients.
8. Use a 'flip chart' to note the points made by your customers. The simple act of writing down their thoughts makes the event interactive and assures everyone that you are taking them seriously.
9. Give each attendee a gift for attending. Something useful is always appreciated. Remember, they are taking time out of their busy schedules to help you. A small gift will remind them that you appreciate their business and their interest in yours.
10. Follow up the event with a summary of the discussion and ask for corrections and/or more input. Pass along any additional tidbits you receive.
11. Keep them informed of changes you are making to your business practices based on their insights.
12. Include time at the next meeting to briefly discuss those changes and to find out if they are working as expected.
13. Finally, listen more than you talk – you will be amazed at what your clients will share with you!