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Rethinking Customer Advisory Councils, Part One: Why and When You Need to Form One

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Editor's Note: This article is Part One of my series, "Rethinking Customer Advisory Councils." In it, we will explore why and when your company can benefit from having one. Part Two, which will appear next week, will lay out strategies for getting the most from the council you have created.



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Why should you think about starting a customer advisory council? How can you benefit from having one?

Part of the reason is that companies tend to hear from two types of customers – the very mad and the very happy. Meanwhile, the vast middle is quiet. Surveys and the ever-popular Net Promoter Score give great directions but at best, only highlight issues. It is like looking at a 2D picture of what is on customer's minds, not a fully dimensional 3-D one.

Of course, there are other sources of feedback too. Some comes from reviews that customers post online. Some comes from the phone reps and other front-line people in your company who interact with customers every day. Still more comes from your salespeople, who succeed or fail based on their ability to understand and meet your customers' needs and expectations. Although that information is great, it often lacks the depth you need to make high-level decisions.

If you want actionable feedback you can use to find real solutions to bigger issues you are facing, you need to dig deeper and have more meaningful conversations with your customers. The answer is establishing a customer advisory council or councils.

Focus Groups vs. Advisory Councils

If you are already conducting focus groups, you might think that you do not need an advisory council. There are similarities. But unlike full advisory councils, focus groups only meet once, and each new group is made up of fresh people. In general, focus groups provide the feedback you need when the economic value of each of your customers is comparatively low – think grocery-store or restaurant customers. Advisory councils are different. They are ideal in situations where the economic value of each customer relationship is high, and you're repeatedly doing business with an important group of high-value customers.

The key to successful focus groups is to allow plenty of time for open-ended feedback. And remember that focus groups don't need to be run by research companies, you can simply invite several groups of customers in for lunch and discussion.

Key Traits of Customer Advisory Councils

The concept behind a customer advisory council is simple. You invite a group of about 10-15 of your best customers to join your council and give you feedback about both your company and your products.

Ideally, it is best to have your entire council convene as a group once or twice a year at your company or conference center. But because it is difficult to get busy people to contribute that amount of time and disrupt their working lives, you can also keep in touch individually with your council members via email, video calls, or periodic phone calls. That might not be optimal, but the point is, it is better to have a customer advisory council than not to have one at all.

What are the best practices to apply once you have formed a council? I invite you to read Part Two, scheduled to appear next week.

About the Author: *Evan Hackel (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/evanhackel?trk=hp-identity-name>), the creator of the Ingaged Leadership concept, is a recognized business and franchise expert and consultant. Evan is also a professional speaker and author. Evan is Principal and Founder of Ingage Consulting, a consulting firm headquartered in Woburn, Massachusetts. A leader in the field of training as well, Evan serves as CEO of Tortal Training, a Charlotte North Carolina-based firm that specializes in developing and implementing interactive training solutions for companies in all sectors. To learn more about Ingage Consulting and Evan's book Ingaging Leadership, visit [Ingage.net](http://www.ingage.net) (<http://www.ingage.net/>). Follow @ehackel (<https://twitter.com/ehackel>).*



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