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# Rethinking Customer Advisory Councils, Part Two: How to Get the Most from Your Customer Advisory Council

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**Editor's Note:** This article is Part Two of my series, "Rethinking Customer Advisory Councils." In it, we will explore why and when your company can benefit from having one. Part One (<https://www.commpro.biz/rethinking-customer-advisory-councils-part-one-why-and-when-you-need-to-form-one/>) explores why and when your company can benefit from having one.



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As we discussed in Part One of this article last week, it is not that difficult to get lots of customer feedback. It comes to you from online reviews you have gotten and from your front-line employees. But if you are hoping to get high-level input from your most profitable customers about the most important issues your company is facing, it is probably time for you to invite important customers to join a customer advisory council.

How can you get the most from the council you have created? Let's take a closer look.

## Best Practices for Getting the Most from Your Council

- **Don't only invite your biggest fans to join** – Of course it is tempting to invite customers who think you and your offerings are nearly perfect. They might stroke your ego, but will they give you the kind of objective, or even hard-to-swallow, advice you need to hear? So as you create your council, ask your salespeople to nominate some customers who are the most difficult to sell, not the easiest – the customers who ask the hardest questions.
- **Rotate your members.** It is ideal to have a combination of fresh members and seasoned members on the council. Because members who have been on for more than three years tend to be less effective, rotating your membership is important. Having a two or three-year term makes sense. If you are just starting your advisory council and plan to have three-year terms and your goal is to have 15 members, start year one with five people with two-year terms, and five people with three-year terms. Then at the beginning of the second year, add five more people with three-year terms. If you follow this plan, your rotation will be set.

- **Prioritize what you want to learn from members** – In general, this falls into three levels: big ideas about where your company is and should be going; feedback about the competitiveness of your products and services in the marketplace; nuts-and-bolts feedback about your employees, website, advertising, marketing and more.
- **Avoid turning meetings into sales pitches** – Selling members aggressively is one of the quickest ways to demotivate a customer council and encourage members to leave. Also remember that while you will show off your new products and invite comments, using your council as a no-cost focus group will only turn members off.
- **Ask questions that go deeper than “are you buying from any of our competitors?”** – Granted, that is an important question to ask, but you need to dig by asking questions that help you understand the deeper issues, and the decision-making process, that lead your customers to buy what they do. Discussions on this topic can become pretty philosophical. What fears are driving your customers now, such as competition from abroad, Federal regulations, or other larger trends? Try to dig deeper to understand what motivates buying, and to find ways to align with your customers’ motivations and fears.
- **Meeting Length** – To get deep in conversation, meeting length is normally two days. If you have really deep relationships – like those between a franchisor and franchisees – three-day meetings may make sense. You need a lot of time for free conversation. If all your business is local, one-day meetings held more often can work out.

### What Incentives Are You Giving Members to Be Part of Your Council?

Council members find tremendous value just through participation and networking with other members and senior executives. So treat them well, but don’t pay them. If you compensate them, you have upset customers that are on your paying council and members of the council won’t want to leave. However, treat them nicely, put them up in nice hotels and provide great meals.

#### *A final thought . . .*

A client of mine once held a three-day advisory council that he called a President’s Meeting. Following the meeting, he measured sales for 12 months. He was pleased to find that the sales increase from the companies represented on his council was 33%, vs. an 8% sales increase among the rest of the company’s clients. The message? People who are more engaged are better customers.

**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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**Anita OMalley** (<http://www.leadarati.com>) on November 14, 2017 at 8:49 am

Great article. Typo in headline though!

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