



CLOSING THE LOOP: THE ART OF ASKING THEM

Lots of things come to a close—like the close of a loan, the close of a project, and most timely, the close of the year—but **what about your marketing communications loop?** Is that coming to a close? It should. The closed-loop marketing concept is simple: sender disseminates message to receiver, receiver processes message with understanding, receiver gives sender feedback on the experience.

As a marketer, you are continually sending messages into the marketplace—but how are your messages perceived by your audience? The intended message must be received and understood for the communication to be successful. How did your audience feel about your message? What was their experience? Shockingly enough, the most effective way to glean this information from your customers is to ask them! Marketing 101? Yes. Frequently forgotten? Overwhelmingly so.

GET THE FEEDBACK YOU REALLY NEED

1. **Focus Groups & Interviews.** These often turned-to feedback tactics offer a great medium for collecting qualitative data. It's important to remember, however, to talk to a broad range of customers. It's usually easy to get feedback from customers who had a good experience or a very bad one, but the OK experience often generates the most feedback on where you could stand to improve. But, if it's hard-number metrics on market dynamics you're after, your best bet is to integrate this method with others.
2. **Surveys.** While most professionals cringe at the thought of a complicated survey project, today's web-based, automated surveys make collecting up-to-the-minute survey information easier than ever. Craft short, poignant questionnaires on a regular basis, and you'll always have current, relevant information captured in a consistent and organized fashion.
3. **Field Tests.** This methodology involves more observation than interaction, but can prove a valuable assessment of your business process. Observe your clients or customers in the actual purchasing environment—and put your assumptions to the test. Is what you assume to work actually working? Do your customers buy at the point you suspect? Is the marketing piece a factor? Is the sales person helping or hurting? Is your office space or store consistent with your overall brand experience? You'll be surprised with what you can learn by just watching.
4. **Track, Track, Track.** This method requires no actual asking either, but it's an important step in closed-loop marketing in today's ever-changing, multi-channel marketing activities. No matter which types of Internet marketing your company integrates, you can track everything from e-newsletter click-throughs to traffic behavior on your website—and there are plenty of dot coms out there to help you do it. While this method lends more quantitative than qualitative information, it still provides a means to track your customer's behavior.

Listen to your markets. Observe their behavior. Understand their needs. If you do, you'll wind up successfully reaching the right people at the right time with the right message. You'll end up spending fewer marketing dollars and most likely “close” many more sales.