THE CHEAT'S GUIDE TO STARTING A CLIENT LISTENING PROGRAM

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An effective client listening program is one of the most valuable tools in any firm's competitive armoury.

If you've been thinking of developing a client listening program but don't know where to start, you're not alone. Many firms procrastinate, stall or fall at the very first hurdle when it comes to effective client listening. Here are some ideas for getting a client listening program up and running today.

1. HARNESS THE POWER OF FIVE

A good client listening program will help you refine and improve the service you're delivering, so that you reduce the chances of clients becoming alienated. It should also help you uncover new business development opportunities (yep, a client listening program isn't all about one way traffic!) and help you bring a laser focus to any future attempts at winning work.

My advice at the outset is to identify five clients that will be the guinea pigs for your client listening program. These should be the people that you've promised you'll review performance for (eg where you've tendered and have pledged to manage quality). But they could also be referral sources or close friends of your firm who you know are going to stay loyal.

I know what you're thinking… Why bother asking raving fans what they think, when you know it will be positive? Actually, sometimes the people closest to us have the deepest and most insights and they'll often speak more frankly about you to another person (see point three below).

Besides, it's usually your biggest fans that will be willing also to help the most. And, by asking a friend of your firm to participate, you're also showing you're not taking them for granted.

2. FOCUS ON YOUR MVP

I'm a big fan of the expression that you 'eat an elephant one bite at a time', because I think it really applies to client listening.

So once you've identified five clients to ask, don't spend months, or even years, building the ultimate feedback machine so that you can roll out a program of Soviet proportions. By the time you get around to asking your questions it will be too late.

Instead, do what tech start-ups are told to do: focus on your 'MVP' or Minimum Viable Product.

What that means in the context of client feedback is that you come up with something that's good but you don't struggle for hours trying to make it perfect. Instead, focus on getting out there asking questions as quickly as you can, with the view that you'll refine what you're asking as you go. You'll soon start to see where any gaps are. But because you'll have some friendly clients in your list of early participants, they probably won't care if you have to go back to them to fill them in. Then keep refining.

By the time it comes to spreading beyond your first five, you'll be well drilled in how to conduct an interview and what information you're looking for.

Speaking of which…

3. BRING IN THE BIG GUNS

With one or two exceptions, people will never tell you exactly what they think of you to your face. So don't start going out there and interviewing your own clients.. Instead, get someone senior involved - preferably your Chairman, managing partner, senior partner or CEO. You should also consider using someone independent (someone from your management team or an external consultant), either in conjunction with that senior person or in place of them. This allows the interviewing partner to put down the pen and focus on building rapport.

By doing this, you're not just going to get better information, you're showing the client just how seriously you take them. Put yourself in their shoes… how would you feel if one of your client's CEOs took the time to sit down with you to ask how you thought the relationship was going?

Put yourself in your colleagues' shoes too… You're likely to have instant buy-in from across the firm when the boss becomes involved.

4. TAILOR YOUR MEETINGS

Even so, having the right people at your end asking the right questions to the right people at their end, will still only get you so far. Just as important is the way you carry out the interview.

I always prefer meeting face-to-face because it lets you gauge body language and build rapport in a way that telephone conversations can't. (Besides how many people are great in person and terrible over the phone?) But I understand that's not always possible.

The order in which you ask questions matters too. After all, there's been a lot of science that has gone into when to ask particular types of questions, how to stage the interview. I always like to break the ice with some easy questions that give them the chance to vent if they need to.

A lot of clients just want their voice heard. So ask open questions - don't put ideas in people's heads - and let them talk. I always tell people they have two ears and one mouth- use them in that ratio. Save your 'high value' questions for when the client has been warmed up - oh, and know when to put the pen down. Often you'll get your best nuggets when people feel they're not being judged.

5. PACKAGE IT UP PROPERLY

Consider how you invite the client to participate and, if you are using survey material, how you present your questions. After all the packaging provides some tangible evidence of the importance you place on the process. An owner of a reasonably large business recently showed me his law firm's Client Feedback questionnaire. It was dreadful. A poorly photocopied checklist of questions taken from a website and copied onto a blank sheet of paper with instructions to fax back the reply! To make it worse it was attached to an invoice.

Also, be upfront with your clients about how you intend to use the information. Make sure they know what they say won't instantly appear on your website in the form of a testimonial.

And remember to position the conversation in terms of expectations. A client feedback meeting is a commitment to listen to the client – you can't promise to fix everything but you can promise to listen and do what you can.

Finally, if you're asking people to give you valuable feedback - and really getting something for nothing - make sure you don't make them feel like they're being put through the wringer. Limit the number of ratings or close-ended questions or else your discussion may start to feel more like an interrogation.

AND FINALLY…

One of the most important things to remember about client listening programs is that there is no one right way to go about it. Just as every firm and every client is be different, every program should be different to.

But, by following these five pointers, you'll soon be building the right kind of program for your clients and your firm.

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