When developing a new product and its marketing plan, you need to know and understand your customer. It is necessary to obtain information about potential customers such as their interest in the product, their buying habits, feedback on product attributes and their willingness to pay a premium for the product.

Telephone calls and questionnaire mailings are two ways most businesses attain consumer information. This article will focus on the second method, questionnaire mailings. Questionnaires are an excellent way to gather information – you ask questions and potential customers respond honestly under the guarantee of anonymity. However, the process isn’t quite this simple. The biggest challenge in developing and distributing a questionnaire is getting people to respond!

When you send a questionnaire, you are asking for something valuable - a person’s time. Therefore, in order to motivate respondents to give you this time, you should offer a reward. This reward can be as simple as making recipients feel valued and important. A cover letter introducing the survey easily can do this by explaining that the recipients were carefully selected and their responses are needed if the product and/or business are to be successful.

Most people enjoy being asked about their opinions. The cover letter also can emphasize that the recipient is a consultant about this important topic by including a statement such as, “We don’t know what people like you think about products/businesses like this, so we are attempting to find out.”

Another way to offer recipients a reward for their time is to do just that – offer them a tangible reward for completing the questionnaire. This reward could be coupons for your company’s products, a small promotional item or entry into a drawing to win a larger item, such as a barbeque grill or gift certificates to a restaurant in your area.

Developing the questionnaire
As you develop the questionnaire, keep in mind that your primary objective is to receive useful, action-able information. Therefore, making the questionnaire as interesting, clear and concise as possible will increase the percentage completed and returned.

When developing the questions, ask yourself...
• Does this question measure what it is intended to measure?
• Are all the words understandable to someone with no experience in the industry?
• Could this question be interpreted differently than I intend?
• If this question is close-ended, does it have an answer that applies to each respondent?
• Does the questionnaire create a positive impression?
• Does any aspect of the questionnaire suggest my biases?

You should consider testing the questionnaire before sending it to respondents. Family, friends or business associates can read the questionnaire, answer the questions and provide you with feedback - eliminating much of the bias, misunderstanding or potentially inaccurate results.

Implementing the questionnaire
There are three steps, each of which involves a mailing, to implement the questionnaire.

First mailing
The first mailing is the initial contact recipients have with your company and your product. Therefore, it is imperative to be clear about your purpose of gathering information, the important role of the recipient and what you intend to do with the results. This mailing should include a cover letter, the questionnaire and a pre- addressed, stamped return envelope.
The cover letter should include the following components:

- Date mailed
- Recipient address
- What study is about
- Why recipient is important
- Promise of confidentiality
- Usefulness of study
- Reward for participation (coupons, entry in give-away contest, etc.)
- What to do if questions arise
- Appreciation
- Personal signature
- Sender’s title

**Second Mailing**

The second mailing will serve two purposes: for those who have responded, it is a thank you. For those who have not responded, it will be a friendly and courteous reminder. This mailing, which should be sent one week after mailing the first one, is simply a postcard containing the following information:

- Date mailed
- Tie to previous letter
- Thanks to early responders
- Why recipient is important
- Invitation to get replacement questionnaires
- Personal signature in different color than typewritten portion
- Sender’s title

**Third Mailing**

The third mailing only is sent to recipients who have not yet returned their questionnaires. It should be sent three weeks after the first mailing and should include a revised cover letter, a replacement questionnaire and another pre-addressed, stamped return envelope. The cover letter for the third mailing should be shorter than original and should inform non-respondents that their questionnaire has not been received but is still desired. It should follow the guidelines below:

- Date mailed
- Recipient’s address
- Tie to previous communication
- Usefulness of study
- Why recipient is important
- Who should complete it
- Appreciation
- Personal signature in different color than typewritten portion
- Sender’s title

Questionnaires have the potential to be useful tools in obtaining customer information. However, recipients must be motivated to complete and return the questionnaires in order for your company to reap the benefits of this information. Writing the cover letter and questions carefully and adhering to the mailing schedule described above will enhance results received from your questionnaire.

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