The Client Advisory Council

Two Functions for the Price of One

By Sherri Petro

Are you wondering if the product or service you've developed in response to needs shared in market research will work for your clients? Would you have more confidence if you had another opportunity to insure you understand the client needs before going forward? Convene a client advisory council and get two functions for the price of one. The council can be used as a sounding board for products/services already developed and as a generating committee for new ideas based upon their needs. How does it differ from traditional market research like focus groups/facilitated discussions and how can a council best perform for the good of the client and the good of the firm?

It's Different

Unlike traditional market research, a customer advisory council is not a one-time event. It is ongoing with client meetings three to four times a year. Each meeting has an agenda but not a discussion guide. It is a discussion with purpose not merely free-flowing. A strong relationship is developed between the client and the company. Relationships can also develop between clients as they come to know each other in the context of the council. This is rare in a focus group atmosphere. Other differences? Action items can be carried forward from previous council meetings. Candid discussions about the firm's actions based upon the council's previous feedback occur as clients take their advisor role seriously.

Planning for Best Result

In order to get the best results, decisions need to be made as the council is planned. The objective, form, roles and logistics need spelled out as the firm works out the specifications for the effort. For instance, the optimal number of participants, convenient location and number of topics per meeting should be determined. The crucial recruiting aspect is also worked through so the council is stocked with clients that are representative of the firm's clients. A personal invitation is the correct approach for a role of this magnitude in helping the firm. Decisions are required on meeting facilitation and from where support during the meeting will be furnished. This meeting should be facilitated by an employee of the firm. A support person during the meeting is also important for client check-in and troubleshooting.

The attached checklist should assist the firm in addressing the critical issues as the customer advisory council is organized.

Implementing for Best Results

Several issues are taken into consideration during the planning process but every nuance will not be covered. The organization needs to be open to changes based upon lessons learned in the first few meetings. Key issues to recognize during implementation? The rules are pretty simple. Plan well. Value the clients' time and comments. Follow-up as promised. Communicate results. The clients are giving the firm the gift of their time. Do not waste it. If they see no value or movement based upon their feedback, they may choose to discontinue their association. If items are not followed up on as promised, they may decline participation as well. If they do not see or hear the results of their input, they may choose to spend their precious time elsewhere.

Conclusion

The client advisory council provides ongoing feedback and new ideas to the firm while strengthening business relationships with select clients. Planned and implemented correctly, the council can be a source of genuine, actionable intelligence and a foundation for greater firm success.

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