

# Strengthening Your Customers' Experience

## Effectively Applying Customer Feedback

One of the biggest changes in customer satisfaction in the last 10 years is the expectation of customers to be included in conversations with the companies they buy from. The advent of social media has catapulted this expectation to the point where many customers are no longer willing to just spend their money. They want to be an active part of what your business does, and how it does it.

In a June, 2011 article in [Businessinsider.com](http://Businessinsider.com), Linda Ireland, global strategy & operational change expert (Aveus LLC) says, "Customer feedback isn't a new concept. It's been around since commerce began. The tools are different and more democratized now. It is easier now than ever before for the everyday customer to applaud your efforts—or to voice her criticisms—of your brand." Customers have always been willing to give you their feedback, but now they expect you to do something about it, and companies who don't, lose credibility and potential sales and referrals.

According to Ireland, "More than half of all companies are not translating customer observations or feedback into actions that can drive performance for their organizations. We learn much. We don't execute enough, or leverage what we learn in the most meaningful way."

Given that the trend toward customer engagement is growing, how will you incorporate your customers' perspectives into what you do? Here are some ideas:

- **Ask the right questions** - before you ask for feedback on anything, make sure you are asking questions to which you can actually respond. If you find out that all your customers are excited about your company doing XYZ, but you don't have the capacity or the intention to implement it, what's the point of asking the question? Make sure that the feedback you're asking for has a potential response.
- **Translate feedback into product innovation.** Use customer observations, ideas and feedback to drive product and service innovation for your company. "Quite often, customers have ideas you haven't considered since they're the ones actually using your products and services on a daily basis. Create simple processes where you can get that direct customer feedback into the hands of product designers and innovation leads for your company." says Ireland.
- **Read between the lines.** Use customer feedback to identify needs that haven't been solved - or even articulated - yet. Don't just take customer comments and feedback at face value—dive in. "What's the need beneath or beyond what you hear or see? Social networking tools like Twitter or Facebook may be particularly helpful here. Emerging needs are the headwaters of demand for your organization." says Ireland. Give yourself the opportunity to solve a greater number of customer needs in the future.
- **Get personal.** Find ways to make your customers feel like they are the most important people to your business (ironically they are, but we often forget to let them know that). Personalize your interactions with them so that you can let them know how valuable their feedback was, and what ways your business has changed as a result.
- **Keep the conversations going.** Customer service experiences are not transactional - they're relational. If all you do with your customers is create transactions, there is no loyalty to your business. They can have transactions with anyone as there's no investment from either party. But, if you create a relationship with them, if they believe you care about who they are and what they say, you're building customer loyalty that builds business and generates referrals. Customer satisfaction isn't achieved by sending out a survey once a year, while for the next year the customer tries to figure out what you did with the feedback. It's a conversation that happens over and over. Feedback needs to be ongoing and meaningful. By meaningful, I mean that the information you get should lead to actual, real change to your business.

This trend toward customer involvement and engagement and the importance of hearing and then meeting your customers' expectations is going to grow. If your business is to survive into the next decade, you're going to have to find a way to creatively engage and involve them in your business.

## Protecting Your Intellectual Property

Does your business produce or sell something that's uniquely yours? Whether it's an innovative method of installing inter-locking brick, a graphic image you've created, a special recipe, proprietary software, a commercial jingle - if you've created it, it needs to be protected. Trying to make a profit from someone else's idea has been part of business for as long as business has existed, so don't ever assume that someone won't try to copy it, steal it, reproduce it and make money from it. There are many ways to protect your intellectual property, and it's worth doing some research to determine how to best do that for your particular property.

Intellectual property is the ownership rights to the fruit of a person's creativity or original work of some kind, usually in scientific or artistic fields. As the creator of these original works, you have particular legal rights, especially as it pertains to the right to control use of the work.

The Canadian intellectual property regime is comprised of six federal statutes. The Canadian Intellectual Property Office (CIPO), an agency of Industry Canada, administers the first five acts, sharing responsibility with the Department of Canadian Heritage for the Copyright Act. CIPO also maintains databases of registered patents, copyrights, trademarks, industrial designs and integrated circuit topographies. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency administers the Plant Breeders' Act, which applies to certain new plant varieties.

Here is some information on the kinds of intellectual property you can protect in Canada through these Acts.

- 1. The Patent Act**  
For an invention to be patentable in Canada, it must be novel (i.e., not already publicly disclosed elsewhere); useful (functional and operative); and non-obvious to someone skilled in the art (i.e., demonstrate "inventive ingenuity"). A Canadian patent gives the inventor the right to exclude others from "making, using or selling" the invention for 20 years from the filing date.
- 2. The Trade-marks Act**  
A trade-mark is a word, symbol or design (or a combination of these) that is used to distinguish the wares, or services, of a person or organization from those of others in the marketplace. A Canadian trade-mark registration gives the registrant the exclusive right to use the mark across Canada for a period of 15 years, with renewal for successive 15-year periods on payment of renewal fees.
- 3. The Copyright Act**  
Copyright subsists in all original literary, artistic, dramatic and musical works, including computer programs, provided that the author is a citizen or resident of a treaty country or the work, if published, was first published in a treaty country. Copyright gives the owner the sole right to produce or reproduce a work, or a substantial part of it, in any form.
- 4. The Industrial Design Act**  
Ornamental shapes or the configuration of industrial objects may be registered under the Industrial Design Act for patent-like protection for a period of five years, renewable for one, further five-year period. To be valid, a design application must be filed in Canada within one year of its first publication in Canada or elsewhere.
- 5. The Integrated Circuit Topography Act**  
Canada's Integrated Circuits Topography Act provides exclusive rights in the design or "topography" of integrated circuits (the semiconductor chips used in modern electronic technology). The law provides the creator of a topography, or a successor, exclusive right to reproduce the topography, manufacture the integrated circuit incorporating the topography and import or commercially exploit the topography or integrated circuit incorporating it.

## 6. **The Plant Breeders' Act**

Plant breeders have the exclusive right to sell and produce the plant breed they have developed in Canada and to make repeated use of propagating material of the plant variety in order to produce, commercially, another plant variety if the repetition is necessary for that purpose.

Protecting your intellectual property means your business will profit from your creativity and ingenuity for years to come, without interference from competitors who may try to capitalize on your idea and benefit from it. Please check out the following for more information:

[About.com](#)

[Osler's Intellectual Property Group](#)

[Intellectual Property Institute of Canada](#)

[Business Development Centre of Canada](#)

[Canadian Chamber of Commerce](#)

## **Effective Probationary Reviews**

### **Avoiding Mistakes That Can Get You Into Trouble**

Employees expect to have a specified length of time for probation when they start a new job. It's most common for employers to give 90 days, but some employers give as little as one month, or as long as six months. The probationary employment period is important, as this is the time during which the employer can watch and assess the employee's suitability for continued, permanent employment with their company. It is also a window in which an employer can release the employee without cause, for failing to meet the requirements of their probation; even if "failing to meet" means that they were not a good fit with the team. The probationary review is a "line in the sand" moment where the employer makes the important decision about how to proceed with the employee. It is the perfect opportunity to validate and acknowledge an employee who has done well, and to counsel and provide guidance to one who is struggling. Here are some suggestions for making the transition from probation to permanent employment status.

### **Schedule a Probation Review Meeting**

Because they're busy, small business owners often simply roll probationary employees into a permanent employment agreement, as long as there have been no major red flags during the probation. This is a mistake. A one-on-one meeting before that decision is made, provides an opportunity for both sides to express how they feel things have gone. This allows the employee to reveal areas they have struggled with, of which the employer may have been unaware. It also allows the employer to determine whether an extended probation might be necessary.

### **This is NOT a Formal Performance Appraisal**

During the probationary period, the employee should have developed a good handle on their roles and responsibilities, but have likely not been there long enough to receive a formal performance review. The purpose of the Probationary Review is simply to determine whether the employee is a good fit and will move into permanent employment. While you'll be discussing performance indicators, you'll be assessing the person's progress to date, and their potential to meet and/or exceed your expectations in the future. The tone of this meeting should be light and friendly.

### **Have a Form Ready**

It's easy to go through a review if you have something that the employee and you can fill out ahead of time that will lead the discussion. This form should have some level of performance rating, but should also have lots of open-ended questions. For an example of a simple, effective review form that you could customize to reflect your own performance indicators, please [click here for a Word file](#), or [click here for a PDF](#). The performance rating factors should be clearly linked to your core values. In addition, you might want to consider saving another copy of this form and changing the language for the employee filling it out ("your" language as opposed to "the employee" as it is in the manager's form). If you're comfortable in

leading these types of meetings, you may just informally chat about some of the person's achievements, challenges, and needs moving forward. Just make sure you have clarity around your format before you start the meeting. If you decide to go this route, make sure you document the outcome of the meeting.

### **Know your Outcomes**

There are only three potential outcomes of a probationary review. The employee sails through the review into permanent employment: there are some challenges that need to be addressed but the person has the potential to be successful and the probationary period is extended; or, it is determined that the person is not suitable for the role and they are not offered further employment. Before you go into the meeting, know in which of these three directions you are headed. If you decide to extend the probation, clearly identify why you are doing it and what issues need to be resolved in order for them to move into permanent employment.

### **Mistakes to Avoid**

**Don't assume you know how things are going, and that there are no problems.** Employees are often trying to impress in the first few months and may be reluctant to talk about challenges, or issues, they've faced. Ask them specifically about this in the meeting.

**Don't ignore your gut and/or red flags you've seen.** If something's been niggling at you, pay attention to it. Many a terrible hire has been made because someone went against their better judgment and ignored the little red light warning light inside of them in order to give the employee a chance. Be up front about any concerns - this is the time to do it.

**Don't neglect to provide the support the employee has identified.** If they have identified areas of challenge and you think the person is worth keeping, provide the training, mentoring or support they need to move forward.

**Don't rush through this process.** Moving an employee to a permanent position too soon can land you in all kinds of trouble if you have to let them go later. It's much easier to end the relationship during the probationary period than once they've become permanent employees. Be SURE before you make the offer.

**Don't pass this off to someone else.** You're the business owner, and unless you have an HR person on staff, this is one thing you shouldn't delegate to someone else. The buck stops with you, and staffing decisions should have your 100% involvement.

Employee turnover is expensive for a small business owner, so before you hire someone into a full-time permanent position you owe it to yourself to make sure it's a good fit. Follow these tips and you'll increase your chances of getting your new employee off on their best foot.

## **15 Ways to Reduce Your Stress in 10 Minutes or Less**

Running your own business is fun, exciting, challenging, and rewarding - but it's also stressful. There isn't a small business owner I know who wouldn't agree that demanding clients, employees who aren't performing up to par, complaining customers, meetings, deadlines, late suppliers, office equipment that breaks down when you need it most, crashing computers, delivery problems, etc. don't leave them tearing their hair out sometimes. So many things are beyond your control, and when the buck stops with you there's no one else who can take the heat. In the middle of a busy, stressful day, when your frustration is at boiling point and you can't get away for a round of golf or an hour-long massage, consider using some of the following quick stress relievers. You can build them into your normal routine and they take only ten minutes or less. Ten minutes of concentrated stress relief can make the difference between leaving the office with a sense of calm, or heading home and feeling that there's a bomb inside of you that could go off at any moment. The next time you're stressed out, try any, or all of these.

1. **Eat breakfast** - it's a fact that people who eat a good breakfast, including whole grains and protein, get a stronger start to their day, have more energy and manage stress better.
2. **Breathe deeply** - take a few minutes to look away from your computer, or that report you've been reading for 2 hours, and look out the window. Force yourself to breathe deeply and slow your breathing down.
3. **Assign a number to your stress** - if specific things are stressing you out, rate them from 1-10. If you can see how much stress a specific issue is causing, you might be able to put it at the top of your priority list, deal with it and get it out of the way.
4. **Relax your body** - if you're the type of person who clenches their jaw, or grinds their teeth, or if your shoulders bunch up when you're stressed, become aware of your body, and deliberately relax those parts of your body that are tightening with the stress.
5. **Switch to decaf or herbal tea.** When stress levels are high, caffeine contributes to heightening your physical and emotional responses. If you know you've got a particularly stressful day ahead, order decaf in the morning, or make some herbal tea to calm you down in the afternoon.
6. **Take a stretch break** - you should do this several times a day. Just step away from your desk, reach up toward the ceiling and hold a stretch. Move your body from side to side and hold your stretches for at least 20 seconds.
7. **Listen to music** - you don't even need to have a stereo at your office - just plug in to a radio station on your computer that streams your style of music. Close your eyes, sit back and just listen.
8. **Call, or Skype a friend** - there's nothing like having a chat with a good buddy. Even in the middle of a busy day you can take five or ten minutes to catch up with someone close. Make sure you pick a positive person who makes you laugh and feel good.
9. **Go for a walk** - around the block, in a park nearby, or even just around your building if you can't get farther away. Moving your body and getting away from your desk is enough to reduce your stress.
10. **Plan something fun** - most of us do well when we have something to look forward to. If you've got a vacation coming up, spend a few minutes adding to your plans. If you don't, plan a fun outing for you and a few friends. Positive anticipation is a great stress reliever.
11. **Drink more water** - most of us go through our days dehydrated. When our bodies get the water they need, we function better, we get less headaches, digest our food better, don't overeat, and just feel better. Shoot for those 8-10 glasses per day.
12. **Take your lunch break away from your desk** - if you're the type who "works through lunch" everyday, you're adding to your stress level. You need a mental break from your work environment regularly to be more productive. Eat your lunch on a park bench or in the staff room rather than at your desk.
13. **Start a gratitude journal** - when you're feeling particularly stressed out, write down all the things you're grateful for that day. It helps to put things into perspective.
14. **Take a catnap** - many people really benefit from 10-15 minute power naps during the day. If you're one of those, close the door set a timer and snooze away.
15. **Read something fun** - especially if your job requires a lot of technical reading. Have a funny book nearby (Dave Barry is my favourite), or escape for ten minutes with a great novel.

No more excuses! Now you have 15 quick stress relievers that anyone can incorporate into their day. Try a few, or try them all! Relieve those stresses regularly and you'll find your work (and the rest of your life) much more enjoyable!

## Tips for Dealing with SPAM

If you use email in your business, you're going to receive SPAM. There's no way around it. According to Communications and Research Analyst, David Kelleher, "Conservative estimates suggest that 100 billion SPAM messages clog the internet daily - this means that nine out of every ten emails sent out are useless." The problem is so widespread that people have started to take SPAM for granted and an

acceptable cost of using the technology. "Deleting ten useless emails is one thing, but having to sift through hundreds of junk messages every morning is another and calls for a different approach to simply pressing the 'delete' key." says Kelleher. "Factor in a few hundred employees and you get the picture."

### **The Cost of SPAM**

Dealing with SPAM is expensive for a small business. If you and your employees are spending even 15 minutes a day reading through, sorting and deleting SPAM from your email, that adds up to a lot of lost productivity in a week, month or year. The cost of SPAM to companies is not easy to assess, but estimates of \$10 billion a year in the United States alone is not far off the mark, suggests Kelleher. "What is certain is that companies could be in deep trouble if they do not deal with SPAM effectively." It's impossible to eradicate SPAM but that doesn't mean companies have no recourse to minimize it.

### **Tips for Minimizing SPAM**

**Use a reputable SPAM blocker software.** There are many products on the market that use a variety of technologies that inspect words, phrases and the history of mail exchanges between the sender and the recipient. Others work by checking the sender's e-mail address against blacklists, greylists and whitelists. The problem is, SPAM is subjective. What is SPAM for one person, could be a crucial newsletter for someone else. Rather than delete the mail right away, use a software program that routes the mail to a SPAM folder, which can still be viewed by the user who can take appropriate action.

**Create two email accounts.** The first email account should have your name in it and be used only for serious, personal communications. The second email account has no restrictions for a username and is used for registration pages and websites that require you to enter an email in order to access or contribute to them. This will protect your business email from receiving SPAM. The latter could be registered through an online email service, like hotmail, gmail or a yahoo account.

**Don't publish your professional email address online.** And never submit your professional email address to a website in order to gain access or contribute to that site, whether they tell you they'll keep it confidential or not. They usually don't. Instead, have an email form web users can fill in that is forwarded to you directly. As long as you respond quickly, people won't mind contacting you this way.

**Never click on emails that are sent to your professional email account from people you don't know or refer to a conversation you don't remember.** Sometimes SPAM emails are sent with a notice of receipt function on them, letting the person who emailed you know that you opened the email. Opening SPAM emails only encourages SPAMmers to keep sending you SPAM.

**Don't reply to, or forward, emails forwarded from friends and coworkers unless it's absolutely necessary.** Often times email collection services (SPAMmers) will send a joke, an alarming notice, or a warning of doom out to a number of people hoping that they will forward the email to their friends, and that their friends will forward it again, eventually leaving a very long list of email addresses on the original message that SPAMmers can use to keep spamming.

**Work with your ISP provider or server.** Chances are your internet service provider already has a SPAM filter applied to your email account. Talk with them about the kinds of SPAM you are getting and whether emails that should be getting through to you are getting hung up in the filter, and work with them to develop a strategy that works for you and your business. SPAM will not go away on its own," says Kelleher, "but investing in an anti-SPAM product can make all the difference for a company. It is an investment that pays off immediately."

Reducing SPAM requires good technology, but it can also be achieved by increasing employee awareness. Show your employees how they can avoid getting onto SPAM lists and make these strategies part of your business policy. If all your employees use these strategies, you will minimize the amount of wasted productivity from SPAM in your business.

Some excerpts from: <http://computers.getridofthings.com/get-rid-of-spam.htm>

David Kelleher is a Communications and Research Analyst with GFI Software Ltd. ([www.gfi.com](http://www.gfi.com))