

Focus on What Customers Are Saying to You

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Second in a series on tools to meet customer expectations, improve sales, services and the bottom line.

If you have taken a survey of your students' or employees' preferences, needs and "wants," you have a broad idea of what they expect and how well your dining service is meeting those expectations.

There are three other important ways to ensure you fully understand your customers (and non-customers) and how to please them: focus groups, review of sales data and observation of customers in the dining center.

Focus group sessions can be useful at any time, but are most informative after you've compiled and analyzed the results of a customer survey. You'll know better what topics to discuss. Groups should have at least six and no more than 12 participants. Too few mean you only get only a few personal opinions. More than 10 or 12, and you may lose control of the session.

In a reasonably large organization, it's most effective to have several sessions for different constituencies. Resident students and commuters have very different perspectives about dining service. So do professionals and support staff.

Administrative assistants, who usually order and supervise catering services, can tell you how they find this element of the operation is performing, as well as giving their opinions as café customers. Admins often have more direct contact with the dining service managers than anyone else. Their insights can be valuable.

Try to include regular patrons and those who use the dining center only occasionally. Don't invite people with a strong bias in favor of or opposed to the service. They won't be helpful.

Select the topics you want to discuss with care. The survey responses will be helpful in identifying "hot" topics.

Group members are likely to be reticent at first. You can put them at ease by smiling and assuring them that all comments will be kept confidential and anonymous. This is especially important if you tape record the session, a recommended practice to ensure your quotes are accurate. Taking notes can distract you from the flow of conversation. (At least, have someone else take the notes.)

Be sure to ask open-ended questions, and don't reveal your own opinions. You want to know what they think, not the other way around. If you get only one or two responses, ask others their opinions. It's likely that some topic will result in a discussion among participants. Don't interrupt unless it goes on too long or heated.

Plan the session for 45 minutes, but let it run for up to an hour if the conversation is interesting and useful. An hour is about the outer limit for a useful session.

One other note: Although four steps are described in this series, the project should take no more than three weeks: a week for planning and two weeks to complete.

Clarion will help you learn what your customers want in the dining service and implement needed changes. Contact Tom Mac Dermott FCSI, president, 603/642-8011 or Angela Phelan, senior vice president, 973/544-6223 or e-mail us at info@clariongp.com