

# How to Get Your Customers to Solve Problems for You

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Crowdsourcing is a technique that sophisticated companies use to translate the enthusiasm of their most highly-engaged customers into valuable marketing, branding, or product-development insight. You can do it, too. Use these techniques to harness the intelligence of customers that love your business, talk about your business, and better yet, will do free work for your business in today's increasingly democratic, user-generated, social-networked, marketplace.

## Things you will need:

- \$50 to a several thousand dollars per month
- Three months
- **Product:** Start with a product, brand, or service that's worth talking about. (Sorry, that part is up to you.)
- **Online Tools:** An email address, website, and blog are essential. [GoDaddy.com](http://GoDaddy.com) offers cheap domain registrations with email addresses and a "quick blog."
- **Wrangler:** Designate a staffer with strong interpersonal skills who will deal directly with consumers.
- **Openness:** Be willing to look for insight in all sorts of feedback—some of which may be blunt or harsh.

A yellow sticky note icon with the text 'step 1' written in a handwritten style.

## Decide If You Really Care What Your Customers Think

**GOAL: Engage in a true dialog with your customers, or don't bother at all.**

Crowdsourcing isn't for everyone, so make sure you have the fortitude required to make the effort pay off. Humility, a thick skin, and a receptive management culture are key prerequisites. "Be prepared to see and hear some things you might not want to. The people who participate may really like your business or your product, but the way they articulate it may be very different than what you'd do yourself," says Chris Arnold of Chipotle Mexican Grill, which [invited college students to create advertising videos](#) for the restaurant chain.

If you think you're game for the crowdsourcing experience, start by establishing a tangible goal, such as improving your product development process or breaking into a new market. Be specific about identifying functional tasks that might benefit from customer input. Start out slow to ease into the process; begin by simply finding and listening to consumers online via Internet forums and blogs.

## Checklist

### Do You Have What It Takes?

If you can't answer yes to most of these questions, then you should probably forget about launching a crowdsourcing initiative:

- Does your company respect its customers?
- Do you have a specific problem, goal, or task that your customers might conceivably help to address?
- Are you really interested in hearing what outsiders have to say, even if the way they say it may seem snarky or harsh?
- Are you willing to show outsiders how your business is run? Are you comfortable inviting them "backstage"?
- Are you are willing to integrate a group of customers into the way you structure your business within your own walls?
- Will you be able to make customers feel important and respond to their questions, concerns, and ideas?
- Do you have the time and willingness to follow through on an outreach effort?

step 2

## Learn Who Loves You (and Who Hates You)

### Goal: Identify customers who will provide the most useful insight.

Your customers can do a lot for you, if you first take the time to listen to what they have to say. Cull your call center and feedback databases to identify outspoken consumers who have a history of repeated interaction with your firm—be it positive or negative. You can also introduce yourself on forums dedicated to your company, your industry, your product category, or your customer segment. Be humble and be transparent. If you work for Acme Widget, then register as "AcmeWidgetRep," explain your role within the company, and make it very clear that your goal is to solicit input from people who use your product.

Betsy Weber, "chief evangelist" at software provider **TechSmith**, likes to begin by privately emailing individuals who are active on such forums to ask what they love or hate about her company's software and what TechSmith could do better. "They get excited because they get to participate," she says. Weber has recruited almost 600 customers to be part of a special "advisory board" that reviews and evaluates new products and services. If the advisory board doesn't like it, the new product doesn't get built.

## What Not to Do

### Be Honest or Be Damned

Never, ever plant your own people to pose as customers online. Do not misrepresent your identity, your goals, your motives, or your intentions. The blogosphere is full of armchair detectives who will go to great lengths to uncover false pretenses, and when a ruse is discovered, the damage to your firm's credibility can be severe. Sony learned this first-hand in late 2006 when fans figured out that a website on which two hip-hop "bloggers" had been raving about the Playstation Portable (PSP) was actually **registered to and produced by a marketing agency called Zipatoni**. Sales of the PSP have been disappointing, and as word of the deception spread, Sony's woes were compounded by a humiliating hit to the brand's street cred.

step 3

## Make Engaged Customers Feel Special

### Goal: Reward passionate consumers with insider perks and benefits.

People will do many things for a business for free, simply because they think it's fun. Products and companies can become hobbies unto themselves, and many consumers will derive satisfaction from feeling like an insider at a company they're passionate about. In return, you should give them recognition, exclusive perks, the opportunity to interact with senior company managers, or free products.

Following in the footsteps of nonprofit crowdsourcing initiatives such as Linux software and the Wikipedia online encyclopedia, Canadian shoemaker Fluevog offers customers fame—in the form of a shoe named after them—as part of an "open source footwear" project. Fluevog customers are invited to **submit their ideas for shoe designs**, Web visitors vote for their favorites, and the winning shoe goes into production (subject to final approval from company owner John Fluevog). Customers who create winning designs gain elite status on the company's website, and they also get to help name the shoe. Fluevog's highly engaged customers become valuable brand evangelists, helping to build loyalty, reduce development costs, and increase the company's chances of making new product launches successful.

## Nitty Gritty

### Three Ways to Incentivize Your Customers

1. **Give them stuff:** Discounted products and cash prizes for creative contests can work wonders to motivate your customers to talk back, fill out a survey, or preview a new product.
2. **Give them fame:** People want to know they're extra-special. Give them special status in a customer community to indicate that their advice had an impact on the company's direction.

3. **Give them VIP status:** Whether it's a day-trip to your factory, direct e-mail access to a top company executive, or an online forum where they can chat and submit their ideas, give them a place to get the inside scoop.

step 4

## Bring Customers Inside the Tent

**GOAL: Give participants clear goals and integrate their ideas into your decision-making.**

The world is full of smart people, and if you plan it right, your customers can become a valuable talent resource, much like consultants, contractors, and outsourced partners. In return, however, you must take their suggestions seriously, which may mean sharing information about product or marketing plans that you normally keep locked away.

Don't expect to control them; just let them be creative and be themselves. It's fine to lay out ground rules about how much control you're willing to cede, how much information you're willing to share, and what will happen to the work participants create. When soliciting creative input, for example, it's reasonable to maintain exclusive rights to video distribution or advertising submissions—just in case a customer generates an offensive ad on your behalf. For trade secrets, invite a small number of VIP customers to work more closely with you, and be sure they all sign non-disclosure agreements with their real names and addresses. The important thing, however, is to think differently about the way you structure and manage your operations to ensure that your crowdsourcing initiative can realize its full potential.

### Case Study

#### How Two Companies Brought the Crowd "Inside"

**Goldcorp:** Precious-metals producer Goldcorp bet big on openness when it took proprietary geological data—information normally kept in high-security computer systems—and published it on the Web, inviting geologists, chemists, and computer experts to analyze it and pinpoint likely deposits of gold. The **Goldcorp Challenge** offered \$575,000 to anyone who could locate a new source of gold. The effort ultimately yielded 127 locations for drilling and to date has led to a whopping 1.3 million ounces of gold.

**Lego:** The European toy giant turned to its customers to develop the next-generation Mindstorms robot, which enjoyed a loyal following of both older kids and adults. The company monitored online conversations about Mindstorms to identify a handful of the most knowledgeable fans, who were then invited to join private forums to discuss shortcomings of the existing product and ideas for new ones. Lego even flew these participants to its Danish headquarters to work for several weeks with Lego product developers. The story lit up online message boards and techie blogs, which in turn helped rev up demand for the **Mindstorms NXT** 2006 release. The new \$250 toy, which can

detect light, color, and sound, became a big seller, contributing three percent of the company's 2006 sales.

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