

How to Find Out What Your Clients Need

By Colleen Francis

Have you ever wished you could find out what a client really wanted? While it would be a fun trick to read their minds, we can't all be the Amazing Kreskin! Instead, let's focus on what's real, and what you can do differently this year to uncover what your clients really want and send your sales skyrocketing.

Host regular client advisory panels.

This one thing is the easiest way to get inside the mind of your clients and find out how you can do your job better, produce more products they want, and offer services they will by often.

What is an Advisory Panel?

An advisory panel is a meeting between you, members of your team and a group of your clients. The goal of the meeting is to discuss industry trends and your clients' needs. It should be an open brainstorming session about what should be coming next.

Panels allows your sales team, your product development team, and other people in your business to become more client or market focused. Everyone will have a clear vision of what the client needs, paving the way for success in your business.

As a bonus, panels will also establish loyalty and create advocacy among your clients, which leads to increased sales, and referrals.

One last thing. An Advisory Panel is NOT a place for sales pitches! It's a place only for open dialogue between your clients and your team.

Plan an Advisory Panel in Four Steps

In just five steps, you can plan and host an advisory panel that will uncover what your clients really want.

1. Host a Panel Four Times a Year at the Best Location

Hold advisory panels four times a year to get the most from this strategy. Hold it at a nice location, like a top-notch hotel or a high-class resort. Choose a destination people want to come to and that is easy to visit in just one day, so you won't be taking too much of your clients' time.

2. Hire a Third-Party Facilitator

Hire a third-party facilitator so your clients won't feel like you are leading the agenda and to keep the conversation positive and efficient. A facilitator will also be able to guide the day and brainstorm without bias, which is a valuable contribution.

Another reason to hire a third-party facilitator is to prevent the conversation from becoming defensive. If your clients start criticizing your services, the facilitator will guide the conversation back to where it should be, and you won't have to become defensive, which will ruin the tone of the meeting.

3. Keep the Conversation Positive, with No Competition

Don't invite your two fiercest competitors to the same advisory panel. A competitive environment won't lead to very effective conversations, and your advisory panel won't be very beneficial.

Invite a broad range of clients that represent a variety of industries so you can get a good perspective on how your clients feel and what their needs are. The more points of view you have in your advisory panel, the more helpful it will be.

4. Cover Attendees' Expenses

Cover your attendees' expenses. Pay for their airfare and travel costs, reserve hotel rooms for them and provide lunch during the panel. Make this an easy experience for your clients and be very accommodating so that you foster loyalty and a positive atmosphere.

5. Act on your results

After you host an advisory panel immediately act on your findings. Reflect on what you heard from your clients, specifically about their needs, find ways to be their solution and implement your ideas.

The Importance of Listening to Your Clients

Listening to your clients will help you see your products and services in a new way and help you find out exactly what your market needs, so you will make more sales. Here is an example.

A few years ago, I began working with a small-business telecommunications company that offered no opportunity for their clients to provide feedback on the products, or sales process, and they were losing clients at an unacceptable rate each month. With my help, this company decided it was time to do things radically differently.

A senior executive within the firm spearheaded a bold initiative to create a client advisory panel. Doing this meant confronting one of their biggest fears—that their clients would just use the forum as an opportunity to complain about what was wrong with their product.

Instead, three interesting things happened. First, the clients began offering suggestions about product features, leading to entirely new applications that had never been considered before. Second, the company suddenly found themselves with a range of success stories as their customers began to share with them and with each other all the ways that they were using their product. Third, the firm's clients became deeply loyal, not just because they felt their input was valued, but also because they had a new sense of personal ownership in the new direction of the firm. *The outcome of this panel was immediate.* Referrals skyrocketed leading to increased sales and continued to do so quarter after quarter for several years.

As you work to make sales, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking you know what your clients want and need. However, it's likely that you have overlooked some of your clients' needs or haven't recognized that their needs have changed. Advisory panels ensure you don't fall into this trap because they give you valuable immediate feedback direct from those that matter most!

Your paying clients.