

THIS WAY FORWARD

SMALL BUSINESS SOLUTIONS



Customer Advisory Boards

>>> *Creating beneficial collaborations.*

By *Arnon Amir*

How can someone learn what is truly important to their customers? How can they stay connected to their key business sources? A new vice president of sales has these questions on his mind.

His company is well established and its products have been used at customer sites for many years. The majority of business was accomplished through a network of distributors, who purchased products for sale to end customers. Therefore, the VP knew the distributors were his most important stakeholders, as well as a direct link to the end users.

In order to learn what was most important to his distributors, he took the direct approach. He met with many key distributors, asked for their input and listened intently. This enabled him to confirm things he already knew and discover things he did not know and, by doing so, he began to establish stronger relation-

ships with these distributors. The VP also recognized that providing an ongoing forum for distributors to express their views, as well as feedback from their end customers, would answer the two key questions stated above. With this in mind, his Customer Advisory Board was born.

Set Up and Execution

He knew there were four steps to ensure the best possible implementation and success of his Advisory Board:

A clear objective. The VP authored the Advisory Board Charter, in which the Board's mission was established as integrating the distribu-

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tors' and their customers' feedback and ideas into his company's product and business strategies.

Proactive membership. The VP selected the distributors who would be invited to become Advisory Board members. The chosen distributors should know their industry and end customers well, have a strong track record with the VP's company and be willing to provide honest feedback.

A meeting schedule. The charter established that the Advisory Board would meet in person twice each year to discuss relevant issues that impact these major distributors, their end customers and the VP's company.

Agenda and results. The first Advisory Board meeting would set the stage and expectations for all those that followed. The VP would facilitate the meeting and prepare a specific agenda, including topics such as business and product development, distributor and end-customer feedback. Objectives would be set for everyone to accomplish and communication encouraged. Results would be measured and acknowledged at each Advisory Board meeting.

Accomplishing the Mission

By establishing the Customer Advisory Board, the VP demonstrated his company's enhanced commitment to its distributors and end customers. In turn, the distributors know they have an open forum and a strong voice to ensure that business and product decisions made by the VP's company are enacted in collaboration with them. **NJB**

About the Author

Arnon Amir, president of GrowthPoint Business Consulting, has over 30 years of sales leadership and business development experience.