

Q: Besides readership surveys, focus groups and surveys, how else can a company effectively measure its customer communications?

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The ultimate measure is sales. The trick is to find ways of tracking your communications against sales in a way that eliminates the effect of other factors.

One way is to pretest various approaches to communication with different, demographically identical segments of your customer audience. For example, a California utility company had been sending out a brochure mailer to encourage customers to call for a free home energy audit. (California energy utilities are required to reduce the per capita consumption of energy, so the audit finds ways for a customer to use less energy.) Response rates from the current brochure had started decreasing. The marketing communication manager pretested mock-ups of several different new brochures with focus groups. He then printed small quantities of the two most preferred versions and mailed them to different random samples of his audience. He mass produced the brochure that resulted in significantly more customer calls.

Another approach is to measure the effectiveness of different types of communications in generating sales leads. A very simple way is to list a different phone number or post office box for potential customers to reach you in each different communication piece—news releases, advertising, direct mail, Web site, etc. Your computerized phone system can track how many calls come through on different phone lines, even if all the lines are actually answered by the same group of people. You can then calculate the average number of leads divided by the cost of each channel of communication. If your tracking system is a little more elaborate, you could go a step further and also track what percentage of leads from each communication result in sales. You could then calculate the revenue generated from each type of communication divided by its cost.

If your company has a system for tracking customer questions or concerns, you could monitor the number of customer calls on various topics, change your communications to better address those issues, and then track whether the number of questions on those topics goes down.

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