

Could this be someone on your sales staff?

*Wish me luck. I am a sales representative going out to sell with only a price list. Since what I sell is almost the same as the competition, price seems to be the only thing anybody cares about. It would help to have something more to offer my customers, but what?*

The above situation was faced by the sales force at one of our client companies. Company management wanted to support their sales force but also wanted a cost-effective way to do it. They were selling produce to foodservice companies. Their customers regarded produce as a commodity. Not surprisingly the customers kept hammering them to reduce their prices. We wanted to find a way to create a value-added component for the client to offer their customers.

To learn what would help our client's customers, we talked directly to their customers. One group of customers experienced fairly high staff turnover. For this important customer group, we discovered a way for our client to stand out from their competitors: help train their staff on produce care.

Through these conversations with the customers, we learned that our client had, at one time, offered free training seminars on the proper handling and storage of produce. Our research effort revealed how very valuable these sessions had been and that they were still needed periodically. Conversations with the client's customers uncovered how our client *already* had a value-added service to offer!

In the end, our client differentiated itself from their competition in a way that mattered to their customers. They didn't charge a fee for the seminars, and this additional service cemented customer relationships with managers who need every cost savings they can get.

In this instance, the customer information we collected revealed a forgotten facet of the client's customer service. Now their sales force didn't have to say "Wish me luck." Combined with some cost effective sales support literature, and the ability to offer training, their sales staff had much more to offer.

Not that this story is unique to this client. Although the particulars were specific to this client, the usefulness of conversations with customers would be the same. The bottom line value of learning from customers what they need or want is widely applicable.