



FEATURE

14 Proven Ways to Connect With Customers

There are many ways to connect with customers, but which ways are the most effective? Business owners and managers as well as customer relationship experts share their tips on how and where to best engage with existing and prospective customers.

By Jennifer Lonoff Schiff | Follow

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Today, there are more ways than ever to connect with customers. There's email, social media, mobile, meetings, focus groups, trade shows. The list goes on. But which ways are the most effective? CIO.com asked dozens of business owners, managers and customer relationship experts to find out. Following are their top 14 recommendations for how to connect with customers--and what makes those methods effective.

Note: The success of a method depends largely, if not entirely, on the business you are in and who or where your customers are. While social media sites--e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube--may work great for some organizations, they may not be the best option for others. Similarly, while some customers may prefer to be contacted via email, others may want or appreciate a phone call or a face-to-face meeting.

So before you invest too much money or time in one particular method of customer outreach, ask your customers how they prefer to be contacted or engaged. As for prospective customers, all the experts we queried suggested organizations try multiple forms of outreach and track which one(s) worked best.

1. Survey your customers. "Surveys allow businesses to identify user needs directly," says Reuben Yonatan, CEO, analyst and editor-in-chief of GetVoIP, which provides guidance and assistance to voice over IP consumers.

"Once customers' needs are known, companies can steer their offerings towards filling these needs," he says. "Surveys are also a good tool to bring in prospective customers who are on the fence about a product/service--i.e.

surveys can be used as a platform for prospective customers to voice their wants/needs," Yonatan says

2. Use newsletters. "Send out a newsletter about 10 times per year," says Stan C. Kimer, president, Total Engagement Consulting by Kimer. "It should have a table of contents up front so people will at least take three seconds to scan it, and the five to six articles should be short (two to three sentences) and include links to useful resources."

"We segment our [newsletters] according to business verticals and construct targeted content to those verticals," says Maciej Fita, SEO director, Brandignity, an Internet marketing services company. "Our newsletters are filled with free information," not lots of advertising, he adds. "It is a good way to stay on people's radar screens."

"And don't forget to integrate social media functionality!" adds Keith Trivitt, director of Marketing and Communications, MediaWhiz, a performance marketing agency. Include "share" buttons for Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and Pinterest, whichever are relevant. "Not only will you increase the social shares of your content but you'll give your customers and prospects an easy way to spread your company's expertise," he says.

3. Blog. "One of the best ways to connect with customers is by blogging," says Deborah Sweeney, CEO, MyCorporation.com, an incorporation and trademarking service. "If you actively keep up a quality blog, not only will your customers read your blog, but they will respond to your blog," she notes. "This creates a positive flow of communication"--and helps build customer loyalty.

4. Pick up the phone. "There's nothing more direct than picking up the phone to call a customer or client," states Gil Effron, cofounder, The Growth Team, a coaching and consulting firm. "Whether following up on a delivery, apologizing for something that went amiss, or wondering why you haven't received an order in a while, there's no better way to build or strengthen a relationship," he says. Moreover, "in a world saturated with one-way communication, the phone provides instant feedback."

5. Go visit. "In a recent study SAS sponsored we asked marketers 'What are your company's most effective channels for customer engagement both now and in three years?'" says Jonathan Moran, product marketing manager at SAS, which provides business analytics and business intelligence software.

"The top response: 'face to face,' from 59 percent of respondents." That said, when visiting customers, it is critical to listen--and not walk in the door trying to sell them something.

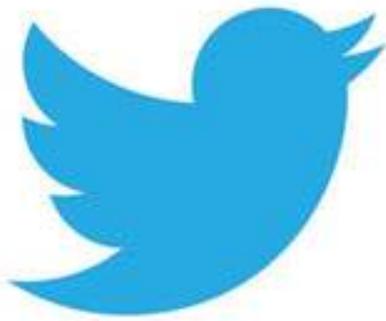
6. Respond to email. "At our company, we make it our goal to respond to customer emails within five minutes, and the response we receive from our customers is usually something like 'Wow, that was fast' or 'Fastest response I've ever received. Thanks so much,'" says Giancarlo Massaro, the cofounder of ViralSweep, which provides businesses tools to create giveaways on their website. "How has this helped us? People love amazing customer service and in turn have been referring people to our service, all because of our customer service."

7. Send a personalized note or a postcard. "I love sending personalized cards by snail mail to let customers know I'm thinking of them," says Kathy DalPra, the owner of Bride Appeal Web Design & SEO.

"Physical mail is so uncommon these days, it's remembered," DalPra says. "When customers receive a card from me, they know I've put thought and time into it, which translates into feeling valued. And when customers feel valued, they buy and refer their friends."

8. Be active on Twitter and Facebook. "One of the best ways to connect with customers is through social media, such as Facebook and Twitter," says Ian Aronovich, cofounder and president, GovernmentAuctions.org, a site that compiles and provides information about government auctions of seized and surplus merchandise from all over the country.

"With social media, you can reach out to your customers at any moment rather than wait for customers to send you emails or phone calls with feedback," Aronovich says. Use your company's Facebook fan page or Twitter account to "engage your followers and keep conversations going. Social media can also be used as a form of customer service, where company representatives can directly answer customer questions and concerns," he says.



"It's critical to have a social media listening post to quickly respond to each issue that arises," notes Chuck Wall, founder and CEO, Customer CEO Consulting. "You may not be able to solve their specific problem, but don't ignore them. They will give you credit for listening and acknowledging their situation."

Similarly, a great way to connect with customers at trade shows and events is to "participate in any 'Twitter parties' using the event hashtag," says Niquenya Fulbright, the president and CEO of Building Bridges Chicago LLC, a small business consulting and executive coaching firm.

"Tweet quotes from the speakers as well as your own tips and advice--and respond to and engage others who are also tweeting," Fulbright says. Why is this important--and how can it help you connect with prospective customers? "One, it establishes you as an expert on the subject, and two, it connects you to potential customers who you can follow-up on later."

9. Use Instagram. "Instagram helps us stay connected and engaged with our customers and fans," says Julie Pocino, co-owner and director of Communications & Development at Barnabas Clothing Co.

"We can post pictures and information regularly, and post contests and giveaways," she says. "For our contests and giveaways, we ask our followers to repost and hashtag to enter," Pocino says. "When our followers tag us, we can then go and comment on their posts too. It has been a great way to interact with our fans, and it allows us to post new pictures and content about our brand frequently."

10. Offer webinars. "Webinars--seminars delivered over the Internet--are a great way to keep the spice in your customer relationship," says Marc Gutman, chief meeting officer, Lighthouse Conferencing, the provider of audio, video and Web-based conferencing services. To get customers interested, "invite a well-known speaker in your industry to present on a topic your customers want to hear."

11. Empower salespeople. "Salespeople can make or break the retail experience," says Joseph Cecere, president and chief creative officer, Little & Company, a provider of design services. "Empowering them with access to real-time answers and information beyond what the consumer can find online provides value that brings shoppers back to the store again and again," he says. "Concierge-like services and expert advice create truly personalized experiences, which are the hallmark of the brick-and-mortar experience. In truth, sales associates are underleveraged store assets."



12. Provide exceptional customer service. "One of the most powerful tools an organization has to connect with its customers is its employee base," says Rick DeMarco, managing director, West Coast Operations, Inward Strategic Consulting, a marketing, branding and positioning firm.

"Every interaction between a customer and employee, whether that is pre-sale, the actual sales process, after sales support or billing, provides an opportunity to either add or detract from the equity of your brand and company," DeMarco says. "Significant empirical evidence exists that makes a direct connection between employee engagement and satisfaction and customer satisfaction and loyalty." So one of the best ways to connect and engage with customers, he says, is to "turn your employees into company ambassadors and brand advocates who deliver on your brand promise and business strategy at every single customer touch point."

13. Go mobile. "Almost everyone is carrying some kind of mobile device today--92 percent of Americans have a mobile phone," says Nur Sharina Shariff, cofounder, Mobile Sales Systems. And "the use of SMS/text messages is instant, cost effective and a tried and tested communication medium that every mobile phone user knows about and knows how to use," she adds.

"In our modern mobile society one can reach with SMS almost anyone at anytime and anywhere in the world within seconds, making text messaging an easy way for a local businesses to connect with their customers," she says.

"What better way to connect with loyal customers than with a branded app that integrates location technology, allowing automatic, personalized delivery of messages to consumers near stores?" asks Eric Newman, vice president of products and marketing at Digby, a mobile commerce and marketing technology solutions provider. "Location-aware apps open an entirely new channel for customers and brands to personally connect before, during and after a shopping experience."

14. Monitor review sites. "Whether it's Yelp, TripAdvisor or Angie's List, find out what customers are saying about your business [on review sites]," says Lisa Parkin, president of Social Climber, LLC, a social media consultancy.

"Responding to customer reviews on these popular sites shows that your company is aware of any problems and is willing to fix them," Parkin says. However, she urges caution when replying to negative comments. Instead of being defensive or picking a fight, try to understand and offer to fix the problem or provide an inducement for the customer to try your product, service or establishment again.

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