

HOW TO LAUNCH A SUCCESSFUL CUSTOMER ADVISORY COUNCIL

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ONLY 41%*

OF MARKETING EXECUTIVES USE DATA FROM CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT TO INFORM THEIR MARKETING STRATEGIES.

This informative eBook will unbox and answer the following questions for your business:

- I. What is a Customer Advisory Council?
- II. Why Does a Business Need a Customer Advisory Council?
- III. Why Should Your Customers Participate?
- IV. Where to Start: How Do You Launch a Customer Advisory Council?
 - How to Select the Right Format
 - Who Should Be Invited & Key Internal Roles
 - How to Set an Intriguing Agenda
- V. How a Successful Customer Advisory Council Works: Dos and Don'ts

Are Businesses Leveraging Their Number One Source for Information?

With limitless ways to instantly communicate with both peers and customers now, most businesses assume it's simple to keep track of success and satisfaction. But the truth is we are just as disconnected from our customers as ever. The challenge is looking beyond the numbers to uncover what's really working for the people and how businesses can improve from that awareness.

*https://images.forbes.com/forbesinsights/StudyPDFs/Teradata-Data_Driven_Marketing-REPORT.pdf

WHAT IS A CUSTOMER ADVISORY COUNCIL?

A Customer Advisory Council is a method for drawing deeper, more unfiltered insight into the wants, needs, and opinions of customers and prospects. A CAC creates formal and informal interactions of a company's top customers and prospects to provide a forum for them to deliver feedback through an honest and open platform.

The specific elements of a Customer Advisory Council, such as format, style, length, and location are entirely depending on an individual company's objectives and resources. The goal of this eBook is to provide a framework for companies considering launching a Customer Advisory Council of their own.



ONLY 14%*

OF MARKETERS SAY CUSTOMER CENTRICITY IS RANKED HIGH WITHIN THEIR ORGANIZATION.

ONLY 11%*

SAY THAT THEIR CUSTOMERS WOULD SAY CUSTOMER CENTRICITY IS RANKED HIGH WITHIN THEIR ORGANIZATION

*<https://blog.neosperience.com/customer-engagement-10-stats-and-facts-to-improve-your-strategy>



WHY DOES A BUSINESS NEED A CUSTOMER ADVISORY COUNCIL?

Without a Customer Advisory Council, your company could be missing out on pivotal customer insight that improves performance, increases sales, and enhances customer experience.

In addition to saving companies significant time, money, and resources, a CAC can provide your company with these benefits:



GATHER UNFILTERED MARKET FEEDBACK

Through a CAC, businesses will get unfiltered market feedback on how to improve the salience of products and services. In this age of constant connectivity, customer input has become increasingly more difficult to obtain. Customer Advisory Councils provide a platform for real feedback on the most important elements of your company's strategy road-map, products, and services that will develop credibility through engagement.



BUILD INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Successful businesses build deep and trusting personal relationships with customers, especially in competitively fierce industries where features and price differences are marginal. A Customer Advisory Council creates an environment where that trust can blossom, and allows customers to view you as more than a typical vendor.. It also creates a 'non-salesy' platform for companies and clients to have a productive dialogue outside of the typical procurement process.



IMPROVE INTERNAL INNOVATION & FOCUS RESOURCES

Unfiltered feedback is only the first step toward improving your business. Having customers evaluate futuristic concepts and industry trends can prompt internal teams such as R&D and marketing to align on development roadmaps and budgeting. These discussions, if framed correctly, pave the way for unconsidered solutions, while concepts that don't have customer support can be deprioritized.

"We were planning a major strategic investment that we thought our customers would love. We brought that concept to our Customer Advisory Council and quickly learned that our major customers couldn't adopt our solution, so we pivoted and decided not to make the investment" - **Division VP, Manufacturing Company**

WHY SHOULD CUSTOMERS PARTICIPATE IN A CUSTOMER ADVISORY COUNCIL?

“What’s in it for me?”

That might be the question current customers or potential prospects ask when asked to donate their valuable time to participate in a Customer Advisory Council. Here are the major benefits to highlight when encouraging customers to join this event:

CAC participants will likely:



Feel heard and respected, enjoy the rare opportunity to help shape the future of their industry, and appreciate being seen as a go-to strategic thought leader.



Enjoy an opportunity to network with other industry leaders and gather insight on upcoming trends and the latest buzz.



Serve their own businesses’ interests. They can have direct input on key products or services, which will allow them to be more competitive and profitable.



Appreciate the invitation to an exclusive event within their industry. No one wants to be the one customer who is missing out on an opportunity within their niche.





WHERE TO START: HOW SHOULD YOU LAUNCH A CUSTOMER ADVISORY COUNCIL?

The transformative potential of a Customer Advisory Council cannot be overstated. Transactional customers have been known to turn into partners when you invite them into an environment where their input is valued.

A Customer Advisory Council simply requires you to open the door, let your customers in, and create a collaborative environment with their peers to help shape the future of your industry. Because of the unique, individual dynamic, no two CAC experiences will be identical.

However, a few considerations should be made when determining the size and scale of your CAC in tandem with the resources available for your business.

HOW TO SELECT THE RIGHT FORMAT:

LEVEL ONE

BEST FOR:

Companies just getting started with Advisory Councils, companies with tight budgets, or smaller companies.

LOCATION:

Virtual engagement (video encouraged)

EVENT TYPE:

Morning or afternoon time block; repeat multiple times per year with dynamic agenda

POTENTIAL AGENDA TOPICS:

- Introduction with industry thought leader
- Industry trend discussion
- Activities to spark feedback and strategy on real life issues



HOW TO SELECT THE RIGHT FORMAT (CONT):

LEVEL TWO

BEST FOR:

Larger companies with localized presence, or small/medium sized companies who want a 'face to face' experience

LOCATION:

Regional hub at a nice location, in person

EVENT TYPE:

Half or Full day event. Opportunities for networking

POTENTIAL AGENDA TOPICS:

- Introduction with engaging speaker
- Industry discussion with small breakout groups
- Networking lunch, happy hour, dinner
- Report out discussions with Q&A



LEVEL THREE

BEST FOR:

Companies wanting to provide a complete and immersive experience

LOCATION:

Full scale overnight customer retreat

EVENT TYPE:

Outside of work environment to allow complete focus on advisory panel

POTENTIAL AGENDA TOPICS:

- Welcome networking reception
- Introduction with high level speaker
- Engaging discussions with small breakout groups
- Report out discussions with Q&A
- Intimate conversations and workshops with industry experts
- Formal & informal networking happy hours, dinner events
- Recreation only events (Golf, Spa, Wine Tastings, etc)
- Spouses invited





WHO SHOULD BE INVITED & KEY INTERNAL ROLES

Your invitation list should be customized to meet your intended customer base and business goals. However, here are a few guidelines and best practices to ensure you maximize your CAC investment.

Who do you invite?

We recommend a thoughtful blend of guests that represent the future direction of your industry when building your invitation list. Consider inviting key decision makers across your current customer base, some high priority prospects, and industry influencers or channel partners (as applicable). Be mindful of including customers from a cross-section of locations, company sizes, and industries.

What if my customers are competitors with each other?

It's inevitable that some of the different customers you bring to the table are going to be direct competitors. Everyone can bring something of value without revealing confidential information to their competition. Remind your customers to maintain their focus on:

- Gaining insights from their supplier
- Examining the parts of their businesses that differ from one another
- Sharing information to advance the industry as a whole

WHO SHOULD REPRESENT YOUR BUSINESS?

The exact number and makeup of internal employees chosen to represent your company will likely depend the level of investment. However, a best practice is to identify and assign a few key roles early on:



PROJECT CHAMPION:

This role is a senior level position that can be held by a CEO, division head, or country manager. At minimum, the 'champion' should be have the capacity to make strategic decisions, remove barriers to success, and has final authority to ensure an excellent event.



KEY ROLES (CONT.):



BUSINESS LEADER:

This person works at the direction of the Project Champion but is responsible for a well-executed Customer Advisory Council. This person might be a marketing or sales leader but should be well-respected internally, understand the business impact of the CAC, and make important day-to-day decisions (such as invites, internal resources, final agenda, location, vendors, etc).



PROJECT MANAGER:

The Project Manager is a taskmaster who gets the job done and makes sure all details are finalized under the day to day direction of the identified Business Leader. This role must be filled by someone who has the time and dedication to be involved in the planning of the CAC from the beginning and is willing to coordinate all of the business's internal resources.



FACILITATORS:

The Facilitator has the vital role of ensuring that, during the the business portion of the Customer Advisory Council itself, insights are gathered correctly, while maintaining the confidentiality of the guests. This role can have multiple levels of involvement in the design and execution of the CAC:

- Advising and consulting during the planning phase
- Facilitating and moderating the event to ensure the correct customer insights are drawn
- Full-service turnkey planning and execution

The Facilitator must be unbiased as they work with customers and the internal teams to drive insights. They are routinely outside experts that the organization brings in for this specific task.



OTHER INTERNAL ATTENDEES:

Additionally, an appropriate mix of functions and levels should be included to maximize the exposure to the guest list. Include sales leadership, marketing leadership, and key members of the product, technology, manufacturing teams, as appropriate.



HOW TO SET AN INTRIGUING AGENDA

A major factor in the success of a Customer Advisory Council is the agenda. It should be engaging for the guests, informative for the host company, and force challenging discussions. Varying the agenda for each Advisory Council meeting keeps it fresh and allows room for accommodating industry changes. Below are some previously successful exercises and discussion items:

1 MACRO MARKET TRENDS
Gain first hand perspective on the effect major market factors are having on your customers. What's important and what is not? Where do they see the industry in 3-5 years? 7-10?

2 YOUR INNOVATION OR PRODUCT ROAD-MAP
By exposing customers to your company's product or innovation road-map, you bring them under the tent. Allow them to guide you and point your product development teams in the direction that best suits their needs and helps balance fast wins with longer-term strategic impact.

3 NEW PRODUCT OR SERVICE FEEDBACK
Allow customers to provide input on a futuristic product or service offering. Ask them to prioritize features that you are considering, or even design a new service that meets their needs. This provides a glimpse into your target customers' wants, needs, and expectations.

4 QUALITY INQUIRY AND COMPETITIVE STANDING
Have customers (confidentially) rank your company versus competition, and have them explain their choices. Your team will likely be surprised at the impact of emerging competitors, the reasons customers prefer certain vendors, and their decision criteria.

5 TURN THE TABLES: INNOVATIVE CONCEPTS
Ask customers what they would create or sell if they worked for the company, and what changes they would make if given the chance. You may be shocked at the level of thinking and quality of unconsidered solutions your customers can provide to solve their challenges.

"I feel like [the Customer Advisory Council host] used us as unpaid consultants. They really forced us to think differently about our business - we came up with some good ideas!"

- Customer (while laughing) from a mid-sized B2B Technology Company

HOW A SUCCESSFUL CUSTOMER ADVISORY COUNCIL WORKS: DOS AND DON'TS

We've learned quite a few things helping and facilitating Customer Advisory Councils with executives across industries. Below is a list of 'dos and don'ts' to help guide your future CAC efforts.

-  **DO align your overall strategy:** What's changing in your industry? What types of insights do you need to consider?
-  **DO plan ahead:** Planning a large scale CAC should begin at least six months before the event. Smaller, virtual, or local events take less time.
-  **DO give value before you ask for value:** Make sure your customer learns from his or her peers, has adequate networking opportunities, and has a chance to personally recharge. Your customers are sacrificing valuable time with their jobs and families.
-  **DO mix it up:** Provide customers with a healthy mix of business and pleasure. Include networking opportunities, relaxing activities, and informal fun.
-  **DO structure a powerful agenda:** Make sure you are intriguing the attendees with interesting questions about their business and the industry. Encourage them to make choices and debate previously unconsidered or risky ideas
-  **DO act on feedback:** Show your customers that you're willing to change and you need their help to improve.
-  **DON'T invite only 'happy' customers:** Select a variety of customers and prospects based on their business model, roles, or geography to gather a broad perspective.
-  **DON'T forget about personalities:** Structure breakout teams and discussions carefully. Consider using an experienced facilitator to help guide the conversation.
-  **DON'T sell:** Respect your customers as industry experts and ask insightful questions without bias. The value during this time is their feedback, not your product.
-  **DON'T forget the little things:** Dedicated resources should be in place to ensure every part of your customer's experience at your CAC is thoughtfully and meticulously planned. Details matter.



WHY &MARKETING?

&Marketing has extensive experience in planning and facilitating Customer Advisory Councils for small companies through global conglomerates. As your facilitator, advisor, or project manager, experienced teams will ensure your business challenges, industry dynamics, and budget needs are all considered when developing a custom national, regional, or virtual CAC.

&Marketing expert facilitators will create an environment where customers feel valued, confidentiality is maintained, and innovative concepts are developed. The final outcome is a clearer customer voice embedded into your company’s innovation, R&D, and marketing process, along with the fostering of more intimate customer relationships.

To learn more about the pivotal experience of a Customer Advisory Council and how you can leverage this experience for your business, contact &Marketing’s Managing Director, Rajat (Raj) Kapur at 317-385-1657 or Rajat.Kapur@and-marketing.com.



RAJAT KAPUR, MANAGING DIRECTOR

As the Managing Director of &Marketing (and-marketing.com), Rajat “Raj” Kapur brings nearly two decades of professional experience in marketing, sales, & strategy development experience spanning B2B and B2C Fortune 50, mid-sized, & small companies.

He is a hands on leader, sought-after facilitator and experienced marketing lecturer with experience across five continents. He has a proven track record of using analytics to drive action, strong interpersonal skills, and unrelenting customer focus.

TYLER CROFT, ADVISOR & FACILITATOR

Tyler has been a popular keynote speaker and trainer with clients on five continents in both English and Spanish. His positive coaching style helps those in his workshops realize quick gains. He brings the combination of both Fortune 500 experience and small business ownership.

Tyler now engages corporations with training and facilitation using powerful tools in communication to create value and increased sales. He has worked with in a diverse set of industries with major clients such Google, IBM, Facebook, Cardinal Health, Thompson Reuters, Cisco, QTS, Mastercard, SAP, Dell EMC, Nielsen, and many more.

