

# Opening Direct Channels of Communication with Your Customers

## Why is it important?

You can spend countless hours researching and learning everything there is to be learned about your customers, gain all of the insights into their demographics and psychographics technology can give you, but until you talk to them, you can't really learn what they're thinking or feeling. The way your customers think and feel about your brand and the products or services that you offer is worth its weight in gold, because it frames their customer experience.

Whether you have 100 customers or 100,000, their feedback is important because it provides insights that can't otherwise be gained. For example, you can tell that people like your products because they are buying them, but do you know the exact reasons why they buy your products?

Speaking directly to the people who use these products in their daily lives can teach you quite a bit. You might learn a new use case for a product or discover a new need that your service fulfills. In both of these cases, you have gained a new marketing insight. Engaging your customers can also help to identify weaknesses, such as things things that your product doesn't currently do but that your consumers are wishing that it did.

Lastly, markets today are changing more rapidly than ever before. Competition in these markets is increasing and making it more difficult for you to maintain a relationship with your current customers. Opening up a direct channel of communication with these customers not only makes them feel that they are valued by your brand, but it enables them to voice key concerns, wishes or thoughts that they otherwise wouldn't be able to share with you. This empowers your consumers every bit as much as it empowers you to adapt to their changing needs.

## So How Do You Do It?

Before, opening up these direct channels of communication was timely and costly. It meant sending people out into stores to directly engage with consumers, or sending direct mail pieces and hoping that they got returned. With the advent of the internet, communicating with your customers got faster, but it didn't necessarily become more effective.

Many companies are trying to engage their customers through traditional or existing channels. While some are experiencing success, that success still comes at a very costly price, requiring a lot of time, energy, and often money.

## Current Direct Channels of Communication

### Suggestion Boxes

In other words, where suggestions and good ideas go to die. Physical suggestion boxes are easily forgotten, or ignored and as a result, the ideas submitted tend to go nowhere fast. Electronic suggestion boxes are a bit more manageable, but can still feel like a blackhole to users, especially if their ideas are never acted upon.



## Mailers

Direct mail has seen its heyday, experienced a decline, and now is making a comeback. The overabundance of direct mail pieces, lead to this communication channel becoming ineffective, thus people stopped utilizing it.

Now that we receive less pieces of mail, it's becoming effective once more. Modern technologies, like making text look like handwriting to personalize these pieces, are having a direct impact on the open rate and the effectiveness of the communications.

## Email

There is power in a customized message delivered directly to your customers. And if this message is in a format to which it's easy to respond, that's even better right? Engaging your customers via email can be a relatively cost effective way to engage your customers.

You can either chose to engage these customers one at a time, which makes them feel special, or you can send an email blast. Emailing them one at a time enables you to better track nuances in their responses and engage a customer further if they provide useful insights. The mass communication in the email blast saves time, and allows you to reach a higher percentage of those customers.

## Social Media

These platforms have made it, not only into almost all of your customers' households, but directly into their hands, wherever they go. Just like the old Party Line, social media platforms have now become the way your customers communicate with each other, the way they receive much of their news, and even where they make purchasing decisions.

When your customers utilize social media and are engaged with you this can be a great tool for gathering insights. Social listening and engagement has become a major part of the sales strategy for many brands.

## Focus Groups

What is better than actually getting to sit down with some of your customers and really talk to the about your brand, the way they feel about it and how they engage with your products and services?

Focus Groups enable you to directly engage with your customers, and see their reactions in addition to collecting their responses. This method of gaining feedback can help you collect a treasure trove of data.

## The downside to these current solutions

Just because direct channels of communication exist, it doesn't necessarily mean that they work for everyone or that they work all of the time. There are positives to utilizing more traditional channels of communication like email, social media and focus groups, but these channels come with drawbacks as well.

## They're Disruptive

Direct mail, email, and even social media messages all start conversations with the brand and try to engage customers, but they aren't a very smooth way to start a conversation. These pieces are



considered disruptive, as in they interrupt the daily life of your customers and place the burden of engagement on them.

Think about the last direct mail flyer, customer appreciation newsletter or social media message that you received from a brand. We're willing to bet that every one of these pieces asked you to do something.

## Management

All communication and customer engagement takes time, but how much time they take is an important question when considering which to implement in your customer outreach strategy. The time and effort these traditional channels of communication take to manage, can be costly.

Every minute your resources spend creating emails, or conducting focus groups is a minute that they could be using to do something else, like actually make sense of the data being gathered. Direct mail requires a heavy design hand, email is faster but still requires time testing and validating, etc.

## The Data You Collect Is Only As Good As the Data You Have

Your ability to collect information through engaging your customers is directly impacted by the quality of the data you already have. If you have bad or incorrect contact information for your customers, it's going to be next to impossible to get information from them. People are now being bombarded with ads and messages from all of the brands they purchase and will often decline to give you their information, give false information or just toss it in the trash (both physically and electronically).

If you have one piece of information, like a mailing address or social media account for your customers, that doesn't necessarily mean that these customers are excited to give you more access to their daily lives.

## Gathering the Data

Once you leverage one of these traditional channels of communication, some resource or resources within your company actually has to gather up the data so that it can be analyzed, and used to make informed decisions.

The channel of communication used to engage the customer base has a direct impact upon the ease or difficulty of collecting that information, as does the technology that you implement around it. Take email for example, if you ask people to respond to an email, someone is stuck gathering up one off responses. Utilizing something like a digital form to collect responses makes it easier to collect information, but does so at the risk of diminishing the participation rate of respondents.

## In Short:

All of the negative aspects of these widely utilized yet ineffective direct channels of communication stem from the fact that we as companies are trying to use forms of communication that our customers choose for their personal communication. You are trying to reach your customers when they are engaged in other activities. Effectively, we are standing on the periphery of their life, waving our arms and shouting "come talk to me" every bit as much as we were, when we were sending people out into stores to directly talk to customers.



## Until Now

Take heart, you're not relegated to using these unwieldy and costly tools. Idea Hunt has created a new tool, a multi-tool of sorts in the open innovation platform. The Idea Hunt platform is a unique online tool that is helping companies of all types collect data in the form of innovative ideas, product feedback, user developed content, and more.

Whether your business is in brick and mortar or online retail or B2B with direct salesforces the open innovation platform from Idea Hunt can help you open up lines of communication with your customers and start gaining you valuable and actionable feedback.

Reach these customers through sending invitations right from the innovative platform itself, share the custom URLs on your social media profiles and in your marketing emails to entice your customers to sign up on the platform as users. As your customers become Idea Hunt users, you gain valuable insights about them through custom signup form fields that include but are not limited to their email address, gender, location, etc.

The platform is easy and fun to use. Rather than place the onus on users to participate, we've leveraged gamification to foster and inspire participation. Administrators have full control over the environment, enabling them to facilitate discussion and collaboration, as well moderate where it's needed. Ideas, feedbacks, images and video can be exported by the administrators to make utilizing the data easier and faster.

## Why Does Idea Hunt Work Where Others Fail?

Idea Hunt successfully opens up direct channels of communication with your customers, because it's a nontraditional medium, built with the express purpose of doing just that. We're not a social media channel first, engagement engine second. We aren't lying in wait in people's mailboxes, hoping we make it past the front door, instead you can invite them in and engage them on our platform.

### Nonintrusive/Non-disruptive

Enables your customers to engage with you, without doing so on their private social media channels, without you entering their home via direct mail or filling up their email inbox. In short, Idea Hunt allows your customers to come to you and engage when they'd like, as they'd like. You can use traditional communication channels to invite your users in, but we don't ask you to continuously leverage these channels and risk your audience deciding to tune you out or shut you off.

### Becomes a Collaborative Environment

The Idea Hunt platform makes it easy for people across the world to collaborate and co-create, to provide feedback, ask questions and learn from each other. It's very nature entices people to collaborate. Because you don't have to friend or be approved by an individual to ask them a question or start a conversation, the engagement happens organically and in real time.

### Community Building

A toll this collaborative, inspires a community. When users accept the invitation or sign up to join Idea Hunt, they create a profile, adding a photo, and a bit of information about themselves. This



personalizes their ideas and feedback on the platform, enabling others to get to know with whom they are engaging. Ideas and feedback build upon each other, and slowly but surely a community evolves.

### It's fun! (Gamification)

By adding prizes and assigning point values to different behaviors or actions in the platform, we have added another level of excitement. With Idea Hunt, you can entice your customers to engage with you rather than beg.

### Easy to Use

Idea Hunt is very intuitive and very easy to use. The easier a tool is to use, the more you actually want to use it. The platform is very intuitive and fluid, and its simplicity enables it to be utilized in a number of different ways.

### Idea Aggregator

All of the engagement happens right on your portal, and can be exported with ease. The ideas, the photos and video, as well as the engagement statistics are all compiled for you. These can be viewed in the platform's dashboard or be downloaded by the administrators for reporting and use.

### Control

The publicity of the platform is entirely up to you. We can publish the URL so that it gets indexed by search engines or hide it from their view. Additional permission settings enable you to control participation in hunts. Uploading your own documentation gives you full control over IP rights and usage terms.

## How to Get Started

### Signing Up

Getting started on Idea Hunt is simple and fun. Our team works with you and your organization to develop the best strategy, and ways to implement your customized Idea Hunt platform. The open innovation platform is extremely flexible and can be leveraged in a number of different ways. Your needs will define the use case that's right for your organization.

### Setup

After the consultation phase, the Idea Hunt team will build your customized Idea Hunt platform. The platform will leverage your branding - from your colors, to your fonts, to your logo and imagery. We'll customize the signup button on the homepage of the platform to give you the exact call to action that your strategy needs.

Once the platform is built, you tell us exactly which of your team members need to have access, and what their user roles on the platform should be. We'll take care of creating their profiles and assigning the appropriate levels of access.

The rest is up to you. You can take your custom URL and publish it on your website, company intranet, social media posts and include it in your newsletter. You can invite users through the



platform to make targeting your customers or employees and garnering their engagement that much easier. Or we can help you during this phase.

After that, you're ready to start creating your very own Idea Hunts.

If you are interested in speaking to an Idea Hunt Team member about creating your own Open Innovation Platform, please email [maggie@ideahunt.io](mailto:maggie@ideahunt.io)

Enjoy the Hunt!