



Your “Kitchen” Cabinet The Power of Informal Focus Groups

By Craig Harrison

The world is full of high priced consultants and firms that will conduct elaborate market research for you, on a local, state, national or even global level. Yet what resources do you already have which you can draw upon without great expense or travail? Did you know you have the capacity to form an informal focus group or advisory council from among your key customers or vendors?

Many organizations form their own focus groups to test market new products or services, beta test software or receive advanced insight into new practices. Why learn the hard way that new products are duds, or that new procedures don't endear customers to you. Focus groups and guidance or advisory councils can give you advanced warnings before you mortgage the firm to a big decision or change of strategy.

Cabinet Making

How do you form your “kitchen” cabinet? Identify key customers who are representative of the geographic, economic or demographic base you wish to approximate. Invite them to join your inner circle to offer feedback and inform your decision making process. Entice them with a benefit, whether a special discount or favored client status, entitling them to pre-sales or first choice on new products. This needn't cost you much but will make them feel valued and special. Let them know in advance what their involvement entails.

Cabinet Communication

How will you elicit feedback from your cabinet members? Will this be done electronically, through e-mail or a special part of your website with forms for feedback? Will feedback be extracted through phone calls or communiqués or using special open house events for your special customers? Remember to make it fun and easy for maximum involvement. Let participants know in advance of your projected schedule so

there are no surprises. Once people know they will be polled monthly or quarterly an expectation is established that is non-threatening. Remember to be respectful of others' time. Don't forget to thank cabinet members each time they contribute.

Multipurpose Groups

Once your group is formed it can serve multiple functions. Among them:

Brainstorming — the stream of consciousness activity where judgment is suspended and participants throw out ideas of all kinds with no limit to imagination and outlandishness. Often great inventions, innovations and discoveries result from this activity as creativity is unleashed. Your team may brainstorm new products, services or partners, innovative approaches to employ or new industries to explore. Your cabinet of men or women from different backgrounds, industries and geographic location insures the group will come up with ideas you normally wouldn't have uncovered alone.

Networking — Did you know that any two people anywhere in the world can be linked through no more than six degrees of separation. Each member of your cabinet brings with him or her, a network of their own: contacts they know and people those contacts know. Each belongs to trade organizations, alumni associations, professional groups, church groups or social clubs. You'll be amazed how easy it is to connect to a company, organization or VIP through networking, and it can begin in your kitchen cabinet. Nothing makes a cold call easier than turning it into a warm call. When you're referred to a stranger by someone in common the doors open that much easier.



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