

Checklist: Win-Loss Interviews

“Asking your customers why they bought from you—or didn’t buy—is a wonderful exercise,” says marketing consultant Tracy Weatherby. “It’s often the most valuable information you’ll ever get, and it almost always strengthens your reputation with customers and even with lost customers. It shows you care.”

A typical win-loss analysis involves telephone interviews with 10-20 recent customers, half of whom bought from the company and half who didn’t. “It’s not hard to make these calls yourself,” she says, “but this is one time when getting an unbiased outsider to help is essential. Otherwise, the answers you get won’t be as honest, and you probably won’t like some of what you hear.”

Weatherby says she asks buyers and non-buyers the following questions:

- What problem were you trying to solve?** “It’s always enlightening to hear how *customers* describe what you’re selling, because that helps you get the marketing strategy right,” says Weatherby. One of her clients recently found that most of its lost deals came from a market the company had decided to abandon. “But apparently the sales force hadn’t gotten the word yet.”
- Who was our competition?** “I’m always surprised by how few competitors the average buyer looks at—usually, it’s only one or two,” Weatherby notes. “So this question won’t help you get a complete overview of the market, though you may turn up a new competitor. Or you might learn that the real competition is a low-tech legacy solution you hadn’t taken seriously.”
- Who influenced the buying decision?** Weatherby points out that technology sales typically involve a “soup” of people, budgets, and requirements. “Finding out who’s who is very useful,” she says. “For instance, you may find that the IT department isn’t the enemy you thought they were—they may just have a few reservations you can easily address up front.”
- How did you feel about our sales process?** “Sometimes you’ll hear that your sales reps are hard to work with, or they’re over-eager, or they don’t have the right answers.”
- Did you find benefits we didn’t emphasize?** “It’s always great to hear something truly wonderful about a product that the company doesn’t recognize,” says Weatherby. “It may not be something that attracts first-time buyers, but it could help sales of upgrades or point to a new vertical market.”
- Are you truly satisfied?** “Toward the end of the interview, I usually ask customers to rank their satisfaction on a scale of one to five,” says Weatherby. “If the answer is out of synch with what I’ve already heard, I’ll dig further. Maybe the product concept was great, but the implementation or the installation didn’t work out well.”
- Was price a factor?** Sales reps pay a lot of attention to pricing, but Weatherby says most customers don’t mention price as an issue unless prompted. “Obviously, price matters, but it’s not top-of-mind for most people.”

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