

Small-business Savvy: Defining Your Small-business Audience

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In most small-business startup manuals, you, the owner, are encouraged to define your audience.

While a great early step, it often is done incorrectly. The instructions ask you to define your customers or potential customers in terms of:

- * What they like to do
- * Where they gather
- * What they buy
- * What drives them
- * Where they live and shop
- * To whom they listen
- * Their worldview

The problem with this, except for maybe where they live, is that you are defining them. The description is your words and thoughts about who they are.

What you are after when doing this (and it is something that needs to be done) is not your perception of their answers but their own words in answering such questions.

This idea of understanding your customers from their point of view grows from the old adage, arisen perhaps from the Cherokees, to “walk a mile in his shoes.” Harper Lee, in “To Kill a Mockingbird,” likewise said, “You never really know a man until you understand things from his point of view... .”

So how do you get that perspective and understanding?

Watching people and reading are great ways to start. In terms of watching, if you can do so in situations similar to what you are planning or in situations where they are using a similar good or service, great. Even just watching in general will add to your depth of understanding.

In terms of reading, all sorts of data have been gathered by various federal and state agencies, as well as nonprofits. You also have the research literature put out by academia. But don't ignore the popular press newspapers and magazines. These sources are more timely in reporting what is happening today instead of “what was.” History is valuable, but knowing that such trends continue is crucial.

Yet both of these sources need to be verified. And verification comes from talking with your intended audience. Words and numbers are great, but you need depth and richness that only stories can offer.

So talking to people - people who are part of your perceived marketplace - is crucial.

Your questions can be specific. Even having a prototype would be beneficial if you are building a new product. Or the questions can just be more general in nature.

Quite often, small-business owners are concerned they would have to talk to a huge number of people. Obviously more is better, but the bottom line is you talk to people until you start hearing the same things over and over and themes are beginning to develop.

Starting a business means knowing your audience. Truly knowing your audience requires that you can define the people in their terms and not yours.

For more help, visit our website, <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness>, and sign up for the monthly newsletter.

More information is available at your local Extension office, as well as at <http://powerofbusiness.net> and <http://www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship>.

The Small Business Administration and its related organizations, such as the Small Business Development Centers and Service Corps of Retired Executives, along with many other state agencies, also can be valuable resources.

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