

# RESEARCH INSIGHTS

## CUSTOMERS TELL US WHAT THEY'LL NEVER TELL YOU

by David Rich

After many years of conducting customer research studies, I am often asked by those who have not yet benefited from research services, "Why should we pay a research firm to talk with our customers? We are in contact with them every day. What can opinion researchers do that we can't do ourselves?"

The simple truth of what opinion researchers offer boils down to two words: confidentiality and objectivity. Research participants know that they are speaking in confidence when they respond to a research professional's questions. We all know that what people say in private is often very different than what they say in public. Customers have a lot to say, but their service and product suppliers will never hear what they need to know because customers will not tell them. If they don't like the service they receive, they will go elsewhere. They may tell their associates, friends, and relatives, but they will not tell the service provider.

And if they do tell the service provider, there is usually so much emotion wrapped around their comments that the service provider either turns a "deaf ear" to it or tries to defend their organization. In either instance, both confidentiality and objectivity are a lost cause. That's why the opinion research industry is one of the fastest growing segments in business today.

Every company person has an agenda with its customers. That agenda does not include really wanting to hear what customers



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have to say and accepting *everything* they say as credible information.

Not so with professional researchers, who establish a rapport with the person they are interviewing, creating a temporary bond that assures the respondent that he or she can feel free to be honest without fear of reprisal. In the space of an opinion research interview, the respondent is invited to be completely expressive, holding nothing back. The interview will not result in a debate, nor will the researcher express a defensive position. It's all about the respondent.

That bond does not and **cannot** exist between a service provider and its customer. A company will never have the advantages of confidentiality and objectivity that their independent research professionals have.

Over the years, we have marvelled at how many things customers have told **us** that they would never tell the companies sponsoring the research. We've felt privileged to function as an intermediary... and we've enjoyed seeing those opinions effect powerful change in organizations once they're out in the open. **RPR**