



TOOLKIT 21 – PROBLEM SEEKING PROBLEM SOLVING TO CREATE OPPORTUNITIES

- ❖ **Get really close to your customers.**
- ❖ **Create new profitable business opportunities.**
- ❖ **Build sustainable competitive advantage.**

Talking to customers is good, listening to them is better, but spending time in their environment, trying to understand their world and how your product or service is used in practice, is one of the best ways to create new opportunities.

The keys that unlock this door are:

- You actually use your own products or service in the environment they were designed to operate in. This enables you to discover the problems and opportunities your product or services create for your customers.
- Asking the right questions.

STORY – ENGINE COMPONENT DISTRIBUTOR

'We accompanied one of our customers on a site visit when they were installing one of our replacement parts in a tractor. We soon found that our packaging was too bulky for them on site, and that the accompanying installation instructions were useless. The engineers said they'd grumbled regularly to their boss about them, but this had never been passed on to us. We sorted it quickly. We increased our business with them by 60% in three months.'

The process is called **problem seeking problem solving**.

Here is an overview of the process.

1. You deliberately immerse yourself in your customer's business in order to experience your product in use. The process works because you see at first hand what needs to be done to help. Sometimes customers have difficulty in describing their needs (the classic marketing approach). Problem seeking problem solving cuts right through that problem. Clearly you should select some big opportunity customers to spend time with where it is worth the effort.

TIP: If it is not feasible to work in your customer's business then just try asking the problem seeking questions.

2. You ask good questions whilst you are with them and problems will emerge.
3. These problems become your opportunities. You help your customers solve their problems by using/adapting your products or service.
4. You develop a solution to their problem and fix it fast! Fixing it fast is what creates surprised and delighted customers.
5. If you solve their problems quickly you could enjoy the ultimate reward of problem seeking problem solving and that is "Friend for Life". This forms the basis for long term business partnerships.

STORY – A STATIONERY BUSINESS OPERATING IN LONDON

A stationery supplier delivered to hospitals and offices across London. The Sales Director was well into the process of problem seeking problem solving which helped him to discover that many of his customers wanted delivery just in time but frequently ran out of supplies. The problem was that it was often difficult to deliver just in time during the day in London because of traffic congestion. So he decided

that their core competency was delivery, not stationery and started to deliver between the hours of midnight and 6.00 am. He also found that their customers had a problem getting supplies of some basic commodities such as toilet rolls, cleaning materials and laundry etc.

The roads were quiet at that time and they found that they could deliver four times the quantities they could during daylight hours!

The customers' problems were solved and so they were delighted and started placing more orders for an increasingly diverse range of supplies. This transformed the business.

Problem seeking problem solving = more business!

Here's how to do it

STEP 1 Identify some target customers with whom you want to do more business because:

- You have a small share of their spend.
- They are growing fast and you want to piggyback on their success.
- You want to become their preferred supplier etc.

STEP 2 Use your contacts in your customer's business to get permission to spend some time working in their business using your product or service.

E.g., A friend of mine wanted to sell more of his cleaning materials to some NHS trusts. He volunteered to work with the cleaning team and worked as a Porter for two days. He identified four new cleaning product opportunities from his range, which the NHS was happy to buy from him. They trusted him and really appreciated the time and effort he took in trying to understand their problems at the sharp end. Eureka. Friend for Life.

STEP 3 Whilst you are working in your customer's environment keep your eyes and ears open:

- What problems do they have?
- Watch carefully how they are using your product/service.
- Are they getting the best out of it?

- How could you adapt your product/service to make it easier for them to use?
- What other problems do they have which you might be able to help them resolve?
- Would the staff benefit from some training in the use of your product or service?

Example

A brick manufacturer wanted to increase their sales with one of the UK's largest builders' merchants. A salesperson spent three days in a customer's merchant branch and was horrified to find that the staff didn't understand the difference between bricks, which could create severe construction problems.

He provided some training for the customer sales team and resolved the problem.

If you can't get into working with the customer just ask these problem-seeking questions. It is not as powerful as working with them but it should produce some interesting opportunities.

STEP 4 Ask problem seeking questions

Example

- What problems do you currently face?
- How do you find our product/service?
- Is this typically how you would use it?
- What do you like about it?
- What do you dislike about it?
- What would make it easier for you?
- What improvements would you like to see in your business?
- What are your priorities right now?

Adapt the questions to suit your circumstances.

STEP 5 Identify customer problems and create solutions.

Review the customer problems.

For example:

- How easy is it to buy from you?
- Do they get the technical support they need?
- How well does your products/service really solve their problems?
- How well trained are they in using your product/service?
- Seek to identify problems that will give you a quick result, e.g. 'we will send a confirmation of your order to help sort out your internal and admin problems.'
- Do a cost/benefit analysis of some of the issues.

Q. Is it really worth your while working hard to resolve the issues?

STEP 6

Fix things fast!

You create the desired state of 'Friend for Life' by fixing things at lightning speed. Pull all the stops out to surprise and delight them with your speed of reaction.

They will probably be use to normal supplier speed 'dead slow or reverse' so stand out from the crowd and gain competitive edge.

Example

Haslam Consulting of Glasgow was asked to quote for a large market research contract. During the sales meeting the customer mentioned that he was generally disappointed with the slow response to their requests. 'You would think they didn't want our business sometimes.' Simon Haslam, the principal of Haslam Consulting, took the hint and personally delivered the quotation for the work within 4 hours. 'The customer was amazed by our speed of response and we got the contract.'

Problem seeking - Problem solving – Friend for life

My target business to problem seek – problem solve is.....	
Their main problems are	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••••
The resolutions are	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••••
Date fixed	
Date communicated to the customer	