

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Q My company makes a safety device that shuts off the water in a bath if it gets too hot. We sell it through retailers like Lowe's. How can we solicit feedback directly from our customers?

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There are lots of ways to get feedback from your customers. How much money do you have to spend, and how detailed do you want the feedback to be? As usual, the cheapest and easiest tool to use is the Web. On your packaging, for example, you could advertise a section of your website focused on safety tips. Then, ask anyone visiting that part of the site to take a survey.

If you have particularly passionate customers, they may give you a lot of information; otherwise, you could end up sorting through dozens of yes or no answers. If you want more detailed feedback, hire a professional, says Angela Y. Lee, a marketing professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. For about \$7,000, Lee says, a market research firm can get you extensive, useful advice from people who have used your product. The firm will send samples of the device to people in your target demographic—say, parents with toddlers—and then solicit their feedback in a focus group.

Andy Mills, president of Medline, a Mundelein, Illinois, company that makes medical supplies such as crutches and canes, found an even better solution: He got someone else to do the work for him *and* share the cost. Sometimes, retailers will



organize and help pay for focus groups on behalf of the companies that make the products they sell; after all, it's in the retailers' interest to boost sales. Medline worked closely with Walgreens to set up four separate focus groups, and the retailer covered half the cost, according to Mills. A Walgreens employee led the discussions. As a result of the feedback, Medline made some changes to the design and packaging of its products.

Finally, talk to the buyers who work for the stores that sell your safety device. To some extent, they *are* your customers. "Listen closely to what they tell you about your product," says Rob Auerbach, founder of CandyRific, which makes novelty items like candy guitars and sells more than 45,000 units a day. "One of our main buyers gave us feedback about a toy that wasn't performing well. We ultimately developed an entirely new product based on his feedback, and it added \$1.5 million in sales last year."