

Whether you do it yourself or get help key thing is starting

Guide to ways professional help can pay dividends

Have you ever begun a new initiative and had someone sneer, "You're not doing that yourself, are you?" Whether it's a nosy neighbour hoping you'll hire an expert to paint your fence, or a consultant who insists no entrepreneur should change a light bulb without the aid of a certified life coach, there's always someone to badger you into taking the more expensive, professional route.

In my world, the most important thing is to start. The further you get into an initiative, whether it's painting a fence or launching a new marketing campaign for your business, the more you'll learn. And if you learn, you're probably better off hiring a professional to finish the job, and you'll be in a much better position to direct them and ensure the work is done right.

In a recent column, I suggested entrepreneurs should be preparing for the emerging economic recovery by surveying their customers, to build relationships, find out what they're thinking and discover ways to serve them better. That prompted a note from a market-research expert in Montreal, **Steve Letovsky of LBC Consulting Services**, who worries do-it-yourself market research leaves much to be desired.

We had a civilized conversation. At the end, I agreed, ideally, every entrepreneur should hire a marketing-research professional if they want to get the most from their customer surveys. And Letovsky agreed DIY research is better than none at all.

If money were no object, there's no doubt most entrepreneurs would be better to engage the services of savvy, results-oriented specialists as soon as possible. Big companies aren't successful because they're smarter than smaller businesses — they're successful because they have the cash to hire experts to point them in the right direction.

Here's Letovsky's take on why entrepreneurs should invest in professional market research:

The price has plunged

Fifteen or 20 years ago, he

says, hiring experts to oversee a significant customer survey cost \$20,000 to \$25,000. Today, such surveys cost about \$10,000, and Letovsky recently signed a deal for \$7,000. The difference? In the old days, you needed to hire tribes of telemarketers to call consumers. Now consumers are usually contacted by email and complete the survey themselves over the Internet. You're paying for real valueadd, not telemarketers The pros will ask what you want to accomplish, and they will turn that into a tight, precise survey that will deliver the insights you're looking for. He says that when business owners write their own questions they are too vague, pose leading questions that bias the results and ask about consumers' general experience with their products, rather than "your last visit" or "your most recent experience." Experts understand respondents' attention spans Letovsky says most consumers will abandon an online survey that takes more than five minutes to complete. So limit your questions to the most effective ones and the information you need most.

They know how to test When Letovsky compiles a set of survey questions, he doesn't send them straight to Customer Nation. First, he runs them by his client's staff — and not just the marketing department, but accounting and operations and anybody else willing to critique his work. He says he gets invaluable feedback, including advice on new questions to ask, suggestions for wording and language improvements, and novel perspectives on the problems they are trying to solve. They know how to interpret

results Amateurs often misunderstand the data, or select conclusions that conform with notions they already had. Experts can hold your feet to the fire, making sure you draw the right lessons, and encouraging you to follow up in appropriate ways, such as revising your products, creating targeted messaging or upgrading customer service.



And sometimes the pros can save you money. Letovsky notes that with professional polling companies regularly surveying so many consumers and business customers, there's a good chance what you're looking for already resides in someone else's data set. The day I talked to him, he had just saved a prospect thousands of dollars by finding "good enough" survey results she could buy that day for \$2,000 rather than conduct her own survey for four times that amount. While Letovsky admits his company lost a sale that day, he's pretty sure he gained a customer.