

IBD

MONDAY SPECIAL

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LEADERS & SUCCESS

IBD'S 10 SECRETS TO SUCCESS

6 LEARN TO ANALYZE DETAILS: Get all the facts, all the input. Learn from your mistakes.

Give Clients Your Ear

6 Feedback? Try feed forward. Some customers tell firms where to go — strategically. How leaders listen:

■ **Request preferences.**

Web-based men's apparel store Bonobos made a splash in 2007 with its designed-for-comfort trousers. "They're not so boxy as the American cut, not as skinny as a European-style pant," said Andy Dunn, co-founder and CEO.

To make a better button-down shirt, the Bonobos team asked customers what they wanted — via Twitter — before sewing. The firm offered its prototype to 300 customers at a reduced price. Input from those beta wearers helped the firm refine the shirt's design.

Dunn says social networking plays a key role in guiding his firm.

"It's about understanding what the customers' needs and issues are and tailoring the company to fit their needs," he told IBD.

■ **Make it personal.** Dunn calls Bonobos' customer service representatives ninjas because they serve clients with the passion of personal warriors. "For a Web business, this is the front lines," he said. "(Customers) feel like they have a relationship with our people."

■ **Serve individual palates.** Special orders don't upset Tossed restaurateurs. "Our number one thing on our menu is the create-your-own salad," said company Presi-

dent Jason Chodash.

Diners pick exactly what they want from a list of gourmet ingredients. Tossed chefs build those salads and wraps to order.

The chain, which launched in New York City in 1998, added a national salad contest in 2008. Customers dream up their ideal salads.

A winner is chosen from each store, "and from those we pick one national winner," Chodash said.

■ **Share the facts.** Diners want to be fully informed. So this year, Tossed added a nutritional calculator to its Web menu.

■ **Demand their demands.** "It's the Customer, Stupid!" author Michael Aun says some firms get it.

Milliken & Co. does. The textile giant presses customers to ask for exactly what they want.

Chrysler executives requested the bucket seat fabric Milliken makes be cut in ovals instead of rectangles. That way the carmaker could reduce the amount of waste material it handled. The retooling by Milliken saved Chrysler 19% to 21% in labor costs and left excess material on Milliken plant floors.

■ **Yes, say no.** Can customers demand too much? You bet. "People do make unreasonable requests," Aun said. "In the absence of an appropriate solution, sometimes you have to fire the customer."

Instead, focus on clients you can serve. **Sonja Carberry**