As was mentioned in the first article of this series, it is critical to meet customers’ needs and, therefore, we must know those needs. Here are some hints and techniques you can use to achieve this goal.

**When customers call to place orders.** This is an ideal time to get more information about the customer’s operation and to suggest additional products and services. In addition to learning more about the customer, this is also a good way to increase revenues.

**Whenever sales or customer service reps call to confirm orders, or details or plans,** they should take the opportunity to ask if the customer needs anything else, if they’ve got other work coming or if there are other projects in the pipeline.

**When potential customers respond to advertising, mailings or initial sales visits.** They initiated the call and are usually ready to share information about their needs. Don’t let this opportunity pass: get as much data as you can so that you can qualify them as viable potentials and to determine how best to approach them.

**When customers visit company premises** there is a great opportunity to discuss company capabilities and how the customer might benefit from them. Personnel can be introduced and products and processes can be demonstrated for the customer. Don’t be afraid to ask questions.

**When anyone visits a customer.** Whether there to provide service, deal with a complaint, deliver a sample, etc., you can keep your eyes and ears open and learn much about a customer’s operation. Of course, you can always ask questions.

**When customers complain about a product or service.** They are, in effect, telling us their unmet needs and/or expectations. Separate information from emotion and utilize the information. As we said in the first article, deal with their complaint immediately.

Anytime anyone is anywhere with a customer, you can ask or at least observe.

We’re at a time when every penny counts and where every effort must be pointed toward the goal of success and profit. And so, the corollary question is, What happens if we don’t know customers’ needs? Well, here are some answers, and they are interesting and should be instructive.

We spend inordinate time and money working to provide features and services that are not important to our customers. We may think they are because we’d want them, but it’s really the customer’s choice.

We fail to provide features or services that our customers feel are important. We may not see them as important and perhaps even frivolous, but if the customer feels they’re important, well, then they are.

We fail to provide the quality our customers expect because we put too much effort into areas not of value to them. There are customers who want and need regular hand-holding, attention, support, contact and so on. There are others who, to quote Sergeant Friday, “only want the facts.” And there are the in-betweens. It’s your job to know.

We provide higher level of quality than some of our customers need or are willing to pay for. This is a tough call when we’re focusing on customer service as an issue, but it’s true. Yet, it’s a call you have to make.

**About the Author**
L. Douglas Mault is president of the Executive Advisory Institute, Yakima, Wash.