

Are You Listening to What the Customer is *Not* Saying?

Tracking your customers' expectations can pay off in more ways than one.

By Alain J Roy

IN A SLUGGISH ECONOMY, CONSUMERS SPEND LESS AND LESS. This means your company's growth will have to come from: 1) retaining your existing customers, and 2) taking business away from competitors. In order to accomplish these goals, your company's top priority should be to listen to what the customer has to say about his/her intentions and expectations.

We all recognize that the driving force of long-term profitability is repeat business from loyal customers. To be sure, offering a good product at a good price at a good location is important, but the interaction between your front-line employees and your customers is also a critical factor in helping to develop or disrupt loyalty towards your company.

Although this may sound like a page from "Basics of Business Management" or "Marketing 101," for most of us, this simple practice can be surprisingly complicated. In order to attract, satisfy and retain customers, you must know what they need, expect and perceive in every phase of each transaction—no easy task. We know that "satisfied" customers are much less likely to remain true to your company than those who are "totally satisfied." Measuring their level of satisfaction is as important as delighting them with your products and services (exceeding their expectations). Knowing what brought them to you (their initial expectations) is as important as knowing what they intend to do after their visit (their reactions—will they recommend your establishment to their friends?).

In short, when a profitable customer decides to leave your brand, you lose short-term and long-term profits. You also lose the free word-of-mouth advertising that a "totally satisfied" customer may provide, not to mention the frequent visits and premium prices that such a customer is usually prepared to pay.

One solution lies in the phenomenal power of *MindShare Technologies' CONNECT 2.0*. CONNECT 2.0 is far more than an efficient and affordable tool for monitoring customer satisfaction: it is a unique customer feedback solution that allows you to access, analyze, interpret and solve the customer-service challenge from several angles.

CONNECT 2.0 can help you to investigate and visualize the following areas of concern:

1) Customer Expectations - There must be a valuable reason to explain why this customer elected to visit your place of business. Was it your marketing campaign that attracted him/her? Was it the sign on the building? Was it the great food/product/service, great staff, great prices, word-of-mouth, out-and-out convenience—or was it an act of God?

2) Customer Perception/Satisfaction - Once the customer has established a relationship with your company, it is fair to say that he/she perceives your brand has something from which a certain level of satisfaction will be attained. Now, did you meet or exceed his/her expectations? How will you know for certain unless you've extended your customer an invitation to communicate with your company?

3) Customer Intentions - Will they come again? Will they bring their friends? Will they talk about their experience and if so, what will they say? Answers to these questions are extremely valuable to your business. This information will allow you to see what marketing strategies work, what products or services are appealing (or unappealing), what the atmosphere communicates, and what the employee-customer experience established (or failed to establish).

Whether the economy is weak or strong, your bottom line will always be greatly impacted by the communication structure between customer and company. (See related articles on this Web site.) It's fair to say that few of us have any influence or control over the economy. We can, however, influence the customer, which will in turn influence the bottom line—which, after all, is our reason for doing business.

Do everything in your power to discover what the customer has to say about his/her expectations, levels of satisfaction and intentions—and then, act on that valuable information.

Tools such as CONNECT 2.0 can be of great benefit, triggering instant improvement in customer communications (employees/management), which in turn can trigger improved engagement on the part of your front-line employees, in turn leading to superior performance. The final results? Significant improvement in daily operations, management duties, customer loyalty—and of course, increased revenues!



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