

Know what makes your customers happy

By  Aki Kalliatakis

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In a world where customers are bombarded with too much information and communication, there is a certain fatigue that comes from companies wanting more and more information about customers and their needs.

Sometimes the information is genuinely about what the business can do to get better and to improve the total experience of their customers.

But more often than not, there are two ulterior motives. First, companies want to glean as much information about their customers as they can in order to cross-sell you more stuff. They don't actually care about what your experience is really like, but they are focused on making their sales targets, and improving their profitability. Second, the company executives want to find out how they are doing versus their competitors: "As long as we are better than them, we should be okay," is the rallying cry.



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For customers that have got too much going on in their lives, you can see how these last two goals for communicating are doomed to failure, and what they tend to do is make customers even more angry and stressed, and therefore to reject that company's offer. It's even worse when companies decide to go the route of efficiency and cost-cutting, and ask you, nay, demand from you, that you complete an online survey.

“Besides which,” most customers conclude, “even if I do share my thoughts about the total experience, ***nothing ever changes anyway***, so what’s the point?”

Bearing in mind how precious most customers’ time is to them, if you genuinely want to get feedback about how your customers feel, then there is no shortcut. Fred Reichheld of consulting firm Bain and Co tried to address this by suggesting that we ask one important question to test their loyalty: “How likely is it that you will recommend our company to a friend or colleague?” It’s not a bad question, but it doesn’t give you any quality information about what they like or don’t like about doing business with you.

So what’s the answer? While there are many ways to get good information about what customers want and how they feel, it’s a good idea to go back one step and ask what information you need. I’d suggest that there are at least five things that you need to know:

- What do they like and don’t like about your products, i.e. what they buy?
- What do they like and don’t like about your service and delivery, i.e. how they get it?
- What do they like and don’t like about your brand and image as a company?
- What do they like and don’t like about the skills and attitude of your people?
- What makes it easier or more difficult for them to do business with your company?

But it’s not only about asking them about these things in a formal survey. There are other ways in which you can garner good information and, more importantly, innovative ideas for improvement. Here is a taste...

Observe your customers: How do they respond to your business? What do they struggle with? What confuses them? What causes them to abandon a purchase? What happens after they buy from you? There are probably dozens of questions that can be answered without hassling your customers.

You can also look internally at things that cause customer misery and customer delight. For example, when do you experience bottlenecks and delays that frustrate customers? What surprising and positive responses did you get when you tried something different? You can also look at some of your numbers like new versus existing customers, debtor days, repeat business rates, and so on.

Talk to you employees – and their families: People who work for you and their families and friends also buy from companies, and maybe even yours. But even more importantly, your staff deal with customers every day, sometimes hundreds of times a day, and if you only just asked them they would be able to share valuable information and insights.

Use mystery shoppers: You don’t have to hire a business to do this. Train your associates and friends to conduct these properly, or even better, go and buy stuff from your business to see what it’s like.

Analyse all comments and complaints intensely, reading between the lines. Before you get back to customers, make sure you have done your homework and understood exactly what, why and how this all came about. Look out for patterns. Record all events. And make sure that every single one of them is followed up internally with a view to improvement.

But if you also want to talk to your customers, make a big thing about it. Thank them profusely for giving up their time, and perhaps even consider some kind of reward or recognition that they will value. Tell them what will happen with their thoughts, perceptions and ideas, and don’t forget to give them feedback afterwards. Whatever method(s) you use – including live or telephonic surveys, questionnaire, informal discussions over a cup of coffee, or more formal and structured customer focus groups – make sure that you record their thoughts and ideas properly.

ABOUT AKI KALLIATAKIS

640-3958 or customer@icon.co.za. Follow [@akikalliatakis](#) on Twitter.

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