

Grow Your Customer Champions ***Bringing Platitudes to Life with Purposeful Interactions***

If you are ready to go beyond the platitudes -- to grow and cultivate customer champions -- you need to refresh all those inspiring phrases about the importance of customers. You need a regular and systematic way to take purposeful action and proactively interact with your customers!

Chances are, your office walls are lined with friendly reminders about your customers. The thing about platitudes is that they're usually true, but they're so overused we no longer "hear" their importance.

When it comes to your relationship with customers, some of the most-overused platitudes include:

*"The customer comes first."

*"Our business is designed around the customer's needs."

*"We wouldn't be here without our customers."

While the sentiments are on target, the challenge is bringing those clichés to life. When you say, "The customer comes first," how do you and your team take action to make that a regular occurrence? How do you create purposeful interaction with your customers?

Having worked both as external consultant and internal corporate collaborator, I have discovered some simple-to-execute and rich-in-outcome tactics that any organization can apply to hear and act on the voice of their customers. Best of all, they cost very little yet help your customers to feel "listened to" and appreciated.

1. Establish Regular Customer Town Hall Meetings

Once a month or once per quarter, invite a diverse group of customers to participate in a facilitated Town Hall meeting where your employees – both front line and operational – are the audience. Let your customers know that you want to hear the good, the bad, and the ugly. Help customers prepare in advance by supplying sample questions like:

- Out of all our services, which do you value most?

- If you were temporarily put in charge of our organization with the mission of turning us into a world-class customer-oriented company, what would you do first?
- What is the one thing that bothers you most about our service?
- What do you see as our competitive advantage?
- When was the last time you experienced a service failure with us? How would you rate the resolution?

Questions like these will help your employee audience understand at a visceral level what truly matters to your customers. Be sure to carve out time after the customers depart to debrief the experience with your employee-audience. Then determine the top 2-3 actions you will take to improve your service delivery.

2. Shop the Competition

One of the best ways to improve your own company's service is to "shop" someone else's. We all know what it is like to be a customer ourselves. We intuitively know what works and what doesn't. You can put that practical expertise into action by providing employees with paid time off to shop the competition and report on their findings. While this exercise does not have to be supported with paid time off, it does increase the perceived importance and validity of the activity. (If you choose to offer paid time off, we recommend one to two hours semi-annually.)

Arm employees with a guide that includes a checklist of things to accomplish during their competitive shopping. Have them collect their personal responses to such key questions as:

- How quickly were you greeted after entering the store or business?
- What message did the environment and store merchandising send to you?
- What was the one element of the competition's service that impressed you so much, you plan to return?
- What turned you off?
- Is there a service practice you think we could adapt successfully?

The shopping experience may be with direct competitors. In addition, don't overlook the value of shopping an entirely different type of business to see what you can learn and adapt.

Compiling your employees' responses and experiences in a disciplined way is key for this activity to have relevance and staying power. Consider these steps to share the feedback and insights.

- Create a bulletin board or blog on the company intranet as a repository for employee experiences and recommendations.
- Create a reward program that acknowledges the best service improvement ideas reaped from the shopping exercise.
- Develop an attitude that it's everybody's responsibility to "shop the competition" -- from the top down.

3. Conduct Customer ON-THE-SPOT Check-ins

While in-depth mail, telephone or electronic surveys are a great way to obtain a snapshot of your customers' preferences, it can be just as potent to simply ask them face-to-face. Identify available opportunities for quick, on-the-spot, customer check-ins. While folks are waiting in line, holding on the phone, or receiving their final bill, you can create opportunities for a 60-second check-in. Choose a "question of the month," then encourage employees to request feedback from their customers by asking:

**We are always looking for new ways to create a better customer experience. If you'd like us to improve on one thing, what would it be?*

**What do you value most about our service?*

**What is the one thing that drives you crazy about our service?*

**If we wanted you to encourage your friends and families to do business with us, what would we need to improve to earn that business?*

Gather all feedback and create an end of the month wrap-up to summarize what you learned from this month's customer on-the-spot check-in. Most

importantly, identify the ideas to be implemented and then follow through. Initiatives of this nature gain credibility rapidly when the results of the exercise are used in meaningful ways.

4. Create a Customer-Focused Internal Blog

On your company's intranet, create a blog that includes and encourages your employees to share:

- Customer service best practices. (This is a great opportunity for employees to toot their own horn or recognize a colleague!)
- Leadership commentary on the customer experience.
- Customer stories and photos. (Highlight your customers by sharing how you and the company helped them -- whether it's securing a new loan to start their business, installing a new computer system that improved productivity, helping select a new travel wardrobe that made life on the road a breeze, as examples) Your customers will be delighted that you are showcasing them or their businesses!

5. Invite Customers to Strategy and Staff Meetings

The next time you are holding a monthly staff meeting, invite a customer to address the team before the meeting agenda takes off. Ask your guest how the team/organization is doing from his or her perspective.

Or the next time you pull your team together to plan strategy, ask a few customers to participate. They will quickly help you align policies, practices, and procedures with their needs. They'll let you know what is important to plan for in the future.

6. Gather Testimonials and Reward Customer-Champions who Refer Business

As you develop these relationships with customer champions, they become the equivalent of an unpaid sales force, championing your business in their circles of influence. Systematically gather testimonials from your happy customers as

they will prove to be a goldmine in ways that range from providing quotes in marketing materials to being available for media interviews about your business. Nothing sells your business as well as a good word from a delighted customer.

In addition, create ways to reward customers for referring business to you. Whether it is a discount, free product or preferred customer status for service requests – it will ensure that your customers now how much you appreciate their advocacy and you gladly reward it.

The more channels you provide for your customers to be front and center with your employees and senior management, the more dramatically you will move from platitudes to purposeful interaction. None of these ideas are costly. They simply require a dedicated and disciplined mind-set around proactively interacting with your customers. If you are serious about growing customer champions and enlivening “the customer comes first” platitudes, you will ask for customers' responses and listen with discernment to what they have to tell you.