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## Your customer service: Measure it, nurture it

Posted on September 12th, 2013 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



The health of the boating marketplace — our success and our survival — is in the hands of the customer. “Every company’s greatest assets are its customers because without customers there is no company,” wrote Michael LeBoeuf, author of “How to Win Customers and Keep Them for Life.”

In my professional life I’ve conducted more than a hundred customer service and brand studies. I’ve moderated multiple focus groups, developed research modules and survey instruments, analyzed data and formulated findings. I’ve produced brand studies and managed turnkey product feasibility studies. In my full-service agency days I collected monthly satisfaction surveys from my clients. I’m passionate about understanding perceptions and the need to analyze — without prejudice — how a business delivers.

Over many years of conducting satisfaction studies there always has emerged a surprise or two — revealing a critical issue no one knew existed.

Customer service is an integral, yet often neglected part of the sales and marketing wheelhouse. We can create the most compelling advertising campaigns, have the most innovative new products and PR launches, tweet and post and market out the wazoo. But without excellent customer service we fail to sustain long-term repeat customers and are forced to constantly replenish the well.

Time for a wake-up call? How good is your customer service? How do you measure it? Do you honestly know what your customers think about your business and how they rate your performance? Do you know how they describe your firm to their friends and colleagues? Would they refer someone to you?

You may think you know the answers, but can you substantiate them? It’s like the bad restaurant experience: You go, experience terrible service and never return, even if the meal itself is acceptable. Because you didn’t complain, restaurant management never knows it lost a customer. Sometimes it’s what we don’t know that will kill a business.

Every business needs a consistent customer service initiative. Scores should be transparent and documented. Leadership should regularly review performance results and share the findings. Team members should be trained to understand customer service expectations. What is measured and communicated creates accountability. Customer service begs for accountability.

Although quarterly or annual customer service summaries provided by some boat and engine manufacturers are helpful, they don't allow for immediate response at the grass-roots level — an important element of that kind of program.

One of my retail clients invested in a marine industry CSI program on its own dime — not an inexpensive proposition. I worked with the team to develop the original survey telephone script, which posed a handful of questions to prospective customers. Within 48 hours of customer interaction the dealership knows exactly how well its team performed.

This strategy and the ability to monitor and analyze quickly has saved many deals that otherwise would have gone south. The CSI survey approach delivers a springboard for continuous improvement. It also serves as a resource for recognizing outstanding performers, as well as a red flag to spot poor performers.

This year a colleague recommended an outstanding business book, “The Ultimate Question 2.0 — How Net Promoter Companies Thrive in a Customer-Driven World,” by Fred Reichheld with Rob Markey. I believe it contains best practice ideals that the boating industry should embrace. Cobalt Boats, for one, has designed its customer service platform around the Net Promoter system.

In brief, the Net Promoter concept reminds us that the best companies are those that understand the need for profitability, but equally recognize the importance of creating happy customers who will refer business. A short sentence, yes, but one that is packed with promise. Make it your mantra.

There is a golden rule in Net Promoter scoring: Treat customers as you want to be treated so they will come back with more business and bring their friends and colleagues along, thus becoming “local promoters.” Ultimately this is the goal: to transition our customers to become our best promoters.

Instead of the multi-page questionnaire, which is time-consuming and complex for the customer, Net Promoter boils the scoring down to two primary questions.

1. On a zero to 10 scale, how likely is it that you would recommend us to a friend or colleague?
2. What is the primary reason for your score?

The responses to these questions will drill down to the very heart of your team's performance. The scores segregate the customer into one of three categories: promoters, passives and detractors. The goal is to develop a community of happy and loyal promoters, with a system in place to identify the passives and detractors. The book is replete with helpful strategies to maximize the role of promoters and deal with passives and detractors. Remember, it takes five positives to overcome every negative statement about the company.

We would all agree that customer referrals are one of our best resources for future sales. How does a business earn these referrals? The authors maintain that the customer must believe the company offers superior value in ways an economist would understand: price, features, quality, functionality, ease of use, etc. Second, the customer must feel good about his relationship with the company. Customers must believe the business knows and values them, listens to them and shares their principles.

Is your business growing through customer referrals?

What type of dedicated customer service training do we invest in for our employees? Do we clearly communicate the expectations at the time of hire and then continually monitor performance? Do we

reward and recognize superior customer service within our organization?

Apple employees spend three weeks in training before the first customer interaction. Apple recognizes Net Promoter champions within its ranks through a customized Ovation awards program. Apple has among the highest customer service scores on the planet.

In addition to Apple, several companies profiled in the book have created “customer communities.” Individuals are tapped to provide regular feedback on products and services. Customer-driven companies require customer-driven management. Is your CEO or senior leadership team actively engaged with customers? I love this quote by Harley-Davidson president John Russell: “The more you engage with customers, the clearer things become and the easier it is to determine what you should be doing.”

As the summer selling season draws to a close, this is the perfect time to invite promoters over for a healthy exchange about areas of improvement in your business. Establishing a dealership or retail customer community not only develops good will, but more important, it also provides a direct flow of feedback for ongoing improvement.

Customer service is not a one-time program. It’s an ongoing journey and a committed way of life for good business.

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