

Turn Your Customers Into Your Unpaid Sales Force

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In their book, *First, Break All the Rules, What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman reveal how to keep customers from defecting and turn them into your unpaid sales force. Two key things are required: satisfying their needs and meeting their expectations.

To understand your customers' needs, you must ask the right questions and listen carefully. Then, you must provide a solution that is unique to a particular customer's issues. By focusing on needs, versus selling product, you insure customer satisfaction.

While needs vary from industry to industry, customer expectations remain constant across all types of business and all types of people. In any industry or business, customers **expect accuracy, availability, partnership and advice**. Moreover, these needs are hierarchical. The lower-level expectations must be met for the customer to pay attention to the higher levels. Meeting these four expectations in sequence will turn prospects into loyal customers who will sing your praises to others.

Level One:

First and foremost, customers expect accuracy. If you tell them a product has a particular capability, then they expect that functionality. If you tell them the product is easy to use, they expect all staff members to immediately utilize it. The bottom line is you must know what you are talking about and have products or services that do what you say. You must also be able to communicate what you know effectively. Everyone can accept an occasional lapse in accuracy, but if it is consistent, trust will be irrevocably broken, and customers will flock to your competitors. Once trust is jeopardized, it is rarely regained.

Level Two:

Customers also want availability. For example, they expect products to be delivered within a reasonable amount of time, not back ordered. They expect tech support to be 24-7 and calls returned quickly. Any company that makes itself more accessible obviously will increase the number of customers willing to try their products or services.

Before you get too cocky about being able to meet these needs, remember that it will be just as easy for your competitors. If you don't do more to satisfy your customers, the competition will steal your advantage. Also, level one and level two expectations only prevent customer dissatisfaction. People react only if accuracy and availability are insufficient. The next two expectations are what create satisfaction.

Level Three:

Customers want a partnership where they feel you listen to their problems and are responsive to them. Their world is often complicated and full of snake pits. If they believe you see things through their eyes and will go the extra mile to help them, they move another step closer to real satisfaction and genuine advocacy.

Level Four:

At the highest level, customers expect advice. They feel the closest bonds to organizations that have helped them learn something new, be it how to prevent a reoccurring problem or ways to grow their business. With learning, there is loyalty.

While level one and two expectations can be met with technology or processes, level three and four require relationship building, and this takes time to develop. For example, most teaching occurs between one employee and one customer after a period of time.

To insure level three and four, everyone in the organization from the top down must be committed to developing relationships. Senior level managers must also make sure all employees understand the ins and outs of their products and services so that

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they can advise the customers on issues they may not have considered and so that the customer can conclude you are truly partnering with them.

Regardless of whether you are a frontline representative, a product manager or sales person, effective communication skills are essential. All employees must know how to listen and to relay information to others in a sincere, interested manner.

Once customers feel you have met their expectations and satisfied their needs, they become your advocates. More than marketing, more than promotions, more than price reductions, they are fuel for sustained growth.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. To reach us, phone (847) 438-4480 or contact our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.