

A Novel Concept: What Do Customers Think of Customer Service?

A Q&A with the most important person to your business—your customer

by Scott Hornstein

MANAGEsmarter

We discuss CRM and customer service issues from a lofty position. We speak of strategies and processes and successes—the articles and case histories I find are largely congratulatory.

What I don't find are articles and case studies reflecting what customers think. Are they equally as delighted? To find out, I thought I'd ask some customers how they feel about some of the basic issues. I put together a survey and sent it to my database of family, friends, business associates, acquaintances and referrals... each and every one a customer of many companies.

Their answers are, to me, a cold shower. Let's just say the report card is bad. Is this pure research and are the results projectable? Absolutely not. These results are qualitative and directional. I would suggest that rather than try to discredit the negative, let's embrace reality.

Do I have an axe to grind, a preconceived notion I'm trying to prove? Yep. I've worked in several industries over several decades and seen several business cycles. I believe that customer service is the competitive differentiator of the future, starting yesterday.

Here's a sampling of the questions asked, replete with answers; I'll meet you at the end.

The term “customer service” might be used as part of describing a company’s attitude or way of doing business (e.g., we are committed to excellent customer service). What three qualities should a company’s customer service have to meet your standards?

Here's how the respondents' answers ranked:

1. Respect for the customer; timeliness; easy to do business with.
2. Knowledgeable and empowered staff.
3. Politeness (“please” and “thank you”; honesty and integrity; treat others the way you want to be treated).
4. Desire to meet my needs/commitment to quality.
5. Accessibility/my choice (most frequently, a human).

Over your current experiences, does customer service today meet your expectations? Please respond on a scale of one to 10 (one being “absolutely not” and 10 being “deliriously yes”).

Average score: 3.7.

Almost 20% of the responses were ones.

How would you rank large corporations’ commitment to customer service (on the same one-to-10 scale)?

Average score: Three.

40% of the responses were for ones.

If you have a customer service question or issue, what are the three most important things to you?

Respondents said:

1. A knowledgeable, empowered CSR.
2. Speed of resolution.
3. Talking with someone who's polite and courteous.

In general, what are your expectations of your initial customer service interaction? What do you expect will happen (one being “absolutely nothing” and 10 being “thoroughly delighted”).

Average response was a 4.6.

How important is customer service to you when you make a decision to purchase from a company (one being “no difference” and 10 being “nothing is more important”)?

Average score: 7.8.

Over 30% of the responses were 10s.

What should companies do to make sure their customer service meets your standards and expectations?

A sampling of responses:

- “First impressions are king. You can't risk a sloppy encounter.”
- “I'm a sucker for a genuinely nice, sincere person.”
- “Respect the customer. Stay true to all the B.S.”

slogans you claim in the commercials. Get a human on the phone so that my time isn't wasted. Have knowledgeable staff to answer my questions correctly the first time."

"Have multiple ways to deliver answers and satisfaction."

"Trust is a big thing. Make the customer feel comfortable that they made the right decision."

So what do we do with all of this? My take is that corporations have substantial opportunity for improvement. Customer service is critical to the purchase (and most importantly, the repurchase) decision. Customers' standards for service are very reasonable. And customers are very clear that corporations are not delivering.

I suggest we get our arms around three imperatives that together, add up to our viability going forward:

1. Happier customers stay longer and buy more. CRM, whether we really mean yield management, sales force automation or just plain old selling, cannot reach its potential if the enterprise does not deliver on its promise of satisfying customers—which can be as easy as giving them a quick and correct answer to their question. Otherwise, we're caught in an endless (and expensive) revolving door of drive-by relationships where emphasis is not on value, but on price. This could be seen as a death spiral. Do I really have to explain this?

2. Customers are generally not happy with the way corporations and brand marketers treat them. We're on a short leash. Customers reassess their "relationship" with each interaction. The ball is our court to burnish brand...or blow it to smithereens. Customers remember how they were treated last time when they consider buying again.

Step one is we're missing the basic blocking and tackling. If customer care interaction is not rooted in politeness, in "please" and "thank you," we'll never get to respect. This just blows me away.

Step two is to understand how customers want to be treated—how they define value—and deliver

it. And if customers want to talk to a human, and that influences all their future behavior, what's the big deal? As one survey respondent said, "Own the experience and don't outsource. Stop penny-pinching."

3. Customer service has got to be implemented as a strategic product. Customer service—or customer care, as I prefer—is delivered by the customer-facing personnel, which are usually the lowest paid and at the bottom of the food chain. They are the company. If we want them to sing the same tune as the folks in the C-suite, who often have the largest paychecks and least customer face time, we must embrace the profit-generating potential of treating our customers well.

I know it's a messy business, and these customers are icky and annoying, but if we stiff-arm them they're gone in a heartbeat and willing to tell all their friends. Consider what another respondent said: "I believe a lot of this can be attributed to the way employees are treated by their employers. Value begets value."

Implementation must come with definition, measurement and reward, and the recognition that there is a healthy dose of emotion. Consider the words of Warren Buffet (a somewhat successful businessman): "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently." ■



H O R N S T E I N A S S O C I A T E S

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