

Why survey customers if you're not going to follow up?

In my last column, titled “Any monkey can survey; start building relationships,” I described the benefits of a fully operational customer experience management program and its key differences from traditional satisfaction surveys. I cautioned readers not to annoy customers by seeking feedback about their experience if they are not prepared or motivated to act on it. I also shared the fundamental mistake that companies make when they are irresponsible in surveying customers: Bombarding them with an endless list of questions using oversimplified—yet affordable—tools like SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang.

Since then I've learned an astonishing fact. According to research by MarketTools Inc., 98 percent of companies collect feedback from their customers, yet only 8 percent follow up with customers to do something about it.

Sending out a survey is easy. Inviting customers to give feedback and then effectively following up to uncover opportunities is much more difficult. I can only assume that is why such a small percentage of companies do it.

When I speak with business leaders about the importance of customer follow-up, they get it. They know it is critically important and will lead to terrific opportunities. Yet they still fail to do it the majority of the time. Why, especially considering it will lead to at least one of four opportunities to improve or grow your business? Those opportunities:

Resolve an issue. Learning about challenges or problems from the customer's perspective and then taking action not only helps you improve operations but also shows that you care, which in turn makes customers happy and more loyal.

Upsell or cross-sell products and services. Following up with satisfied and extremely satisfied customers provides instant permission and positioning for the “what else” question. For example: “Hi, Mr. Customer. Thank you so much for sharing feedback about your experience with our company. We are pleased you are so happy. We love to do business with you too. Just out of curiosity, what else might



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we be able to help you with?”

Get referrals. Again, you have instant permission and positioning for getting a referral or at least planting the seed that referrals really are the greatest compliment. “Hi, Ms. Super Loyal Customer. Thank you so much for sharing your feedback. ... Who else do you know who might benefit from having a great experience with our company?”

Recognize and appreciate employees. Happy customers quite often have a story to tell about an employee who went above and beyond in delivering a great experience. Capture those stories and best practices, and share them. Doing so motivates employees by clearly connecting them to the difference they make for customers and your company.

Again, why is effective follow-up with customers done so infrequently, and what can you do about it? Here are four strategies to ensure your workforce is successfully equipped to execute a customer experience management program that will build stronger relationships with customers, drive sales and engage your workforce to become more customer-centered than you ever imagined possible:

1. Make sure employees have the knowledge about your company's products and service offerings. A customer follow-up call—whether the customer is extremely satisfied, extremely dissatisfied or somewhere in between—is a unique and hard-to-regenerate opportunity to connect and build upon a relationship. Employees taking these calls should be in a position to answer (or find the answer) to any question related to your business offerings.

A dissatisfied customer may ask, “Why did it take so long for your company's sup-

port representatives to answer the phone?” or “Why do your accountants charge so much for preparing personal tax returns?” Inability to address questions of this nature during the call can make even a satisfied customer reconsider his opinion of your company.

2. Empower employees to make things right. In many situations, there is an opportunity for immediate action to improve the customer's experience. In these instances, customers want to see tangible results—especially considering they spent time and energy to provide feedback.

3. Use technology to automate “triggers” and track customer follow-up. Having the right technology is a must to manage customer follow-up. Employees responsible for following up need to have:

- Trigger alerts, automated messages indicating an opportunity to contact a customer.

- Access to customer scores and comments to help them prepare for the conversation.

- Ability to document information about the call (during and after), including specifics of the conversation and their perspective on the situation.

- Ability to record the status of the follow-up call and, once completed, its outcome.

In essence, your trigger and tracking system becomes a case management work flow that tracks in-progress activity and results. For instance, does someone else need to follow up with the customer next? If the case is closed, did the employee prevent the customer from dropping you as a preferred supplier? Did your employee establish new contacts in the account? Did he or she manage to identify a new sales opportunity?

4. Establish accountability by measuring and reporting on outcomes. What gets measured gets done. Determine which measures the employees who are responsible for customer follow-up should be most accountable for. A few metrics to consider include the time interval between feedback and initial follow-up, average time to “close the loop” with customers, and

ratio of favorable to unfavorable outcomes.

A customer experience management program can seem overwhelming at first. Employees may initially react with an attitude of “Oh no, not another thing I need to do.” Ask yourself whether following up with customers to resolve issues, build relationships and uncover new opportunities is just another thing to do or the thing you should be doing.

Today we have access to a plethora of technology and tools that allow us to do amazing things with respect to connecting with customers. Don't use technology to annoy customers with survey requests. Invite them to provide feedback, and follow up with them through a program that is specifically designed to build relationships and increase sales.

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riety Inc., is a professional speaker on the customer experience, leadership and culture change. He is an adjunct professor at the Simon Graduate School of Business at the University of Rochester and is the author of “Achieve Brand Integrity: Ten Truths You Must Know to Enhance Employee Performance and Increase Company Profits.” Read more from Gregg at www.gregglederman.com.