

Customers Defect When the Silos Don't Connect

When I was at Lands' End, Fortune Magazine did an article on us called, "Getting Customers to Love You." The big revelation about why we were loved was that we could be counted on. We established peace-of-mind with our guarantee. We trained our telephone reps to not only know the products backwards and forwards, but to care why customers were buying them. Our graveyard shift operators were some of the busiest in the business because of the calls they'd receive in the middle of the night from insomniacs who, sure, would buy a turtleneck, but were also on the line to hear the friendly voice on the other end. We had quality standards that customers could count on because we flew quality assurance experts to the plants every thirty, sixty and ninety days throughout the production cycle to ensure they were on course. Products were inspected once and sometimes twice when they came through our doors. And when you called in your order, it was on its way to you usually within twenty four hours. Customers loved us because we respected them and their time. And we made sure that we translated that respect to actions they could see and feel. In the time that's gone by since then, I've experienced a multitude of cultures; some close to that of Lands' End, but most far removed from that respect that we were able to weave into our operation and business decisions.

The fact of the matter is that it's the unusual organization that's set up to let people think and act collectively on behalf of customers. We're stuck in our silos making independent decisions; taking isolated actions for the purpose of executing our discipline, achieving good numbers and earning a good review. Of course the customer experience doesn't happen neatly down each individual silo. The customer experiences a company horizontally, *across* the silos. This is the breeding ground for the lack of respect customers feel and the discontent they have with us. The typical silo structure bumps the customer disjointedly along to deliver the outcome of its experience. It's only when the silos clang and clash into one another that the total experience comes together. And the customer becomes the grand guinea pig, experiencing each variation of an organization's ability, or inability, to work together. Not much customer respect or love results.

10 Ways to Love (and respect) Your Customers

So what I'm going to give you here is not ten tactics on how to execute a great loyalty program or tips on how to cook up some special offer or whiz-bang thing to give customers so they love you. What follows is a list of

hard-work and actions that must be done to show customers you respect them. Do these for a while and then you can move on to the “L” word. By taking care of these universally challenging experiences you’ll be well on your way to delivering and earning customer respect and maybe even someday, love.

- 1. Eliminate the customer obstacle course.** If you asked customers they’d say that the obstacle course for figuring out who to talk to and how and when to get service is over-complicated, conflicting and just plain out of whack. We have forced customers to try to figure out our organization charts in order to do business with us. Instead of seamlessly executing a customer interaction of, let’s say placing their first order from start to finish, we deliver discontinuity in the experience where the organizational breaks exist. Sales sells the product, but Operations is not given the specifics of what the customer needs so what is delivered is a little off. Who does the customer call? Sales? Operations? Customer service? It is in these hand-offs that customer failures occur, in this customer Bermuda triangle that we’ve created. Simplify the roadmap for customers. Make it clear for them how they can do business with you in a way that’s actually beneficial to *them*.
- 2. Stop customer hot potato.** He who speaks to the customer first should “own” the customer. There’s nothing worse that sends a signal of disrespect faster than an impatient person on the other end of the line trying to pass a customer off to “someone who can better help you with your problem.” Yeah, right.
- 3. Give customers a choice.** Do not bind your customer into the fake choice of letting them “opt out” of something. Let them know up front that they can decide to get emails, offers or whatever from you and give them the choice. You may initially build a bigger mailing list by binding customers in with the opt-out policy, but I don’t think it’s something your mom would teach you about respect.
- 4. De-silo your website.** Our websites are often the cobbled together parts created separately by each company division. The terminology is different from area to area, as are the menu structures and logic for getting around the site. What’s accessible online is frequently inconsistent, as is the contact information provided. Even appearance may vary as strong silos create their own “look” which extends into their section of the website. Depending on what link is clicked, customers feel like they’re entering entirely different companies. Figure out collectively what the message is, what the vitals are that you need from customers and how you will serve them via your website and work to deliver an on-purpose brand experience. Otherwise you’ll continue to deliver the defaulted brand experience that’s the amalgamation of the site your customers are traversing right now.

5. **Consolidate phone numbers.** Even in this advanced age of telephony companies still have a labyrinth of numbers customers need to navigate to talk to someone. All of these grew out of the separate operations deciding on their own that they needed a number to “serve” their customers. Get people together to skinny-down this list and then let customers know about it. There’s no big red button to push to make this happen. It requires the gnarly hard work of collaborating and collective decision making – but get it done already! Customers are fed up.
6. **FIX (really) the top ten issues bugging customers.** We have created a kind of hysterical customer feedback muscle in the marketplace by over-surveying our customers and asking (ever so thoughtfully) “how can we improve?” Customers have told us what to do and we haven’t moved on the information. You can probably recite the biggest issues right now. Do something about it. Customers read the lack of action as lack of caring and certainly lack of respect. We all over-brain what the customer effort should be. Start by striking these top ten things from your corporate wide to-do list.
7. **Help the front line to listen.** The frontline has been programmed to get a certain output. Sometimes this means closing the call within a time frame, often it includes some kind of up-sell or cross-sell goal. It may be to meet with a quota of customers in a certain time period. Because we’ve programmed the frontline, there’s a predetermined flow of the conversation that makes it one-sided to the company’s advantage. Yet, this is what we’ve done. We’ve robotized our frontline to the customer all over the world. Let them be human, give them the skills for listening and understanding and help the frontline deliver to the customer based on their needs. Talk about respect. It is not a myth that if you can solve a customer problem successfully you have built a more profitable customer. Crunch those numbers – maybe it will help you to make your case for the resources, investment and commitment required.
8. **Deliver what you promise.** There is a growing case of corporate memory loss that annoys and aggravates customers every day. A customer calls in a product return and is promised a mailing label that never arrives. An appointment is made for home repair and the workman shows up without the right parts. A promise is made for exceptional extended warranty service, yet the process is sloppy and unwieldy. The customer has to strong-arm his/her way through the corporate maize just to get basic things accomplished. They’re exhausted from the wrestling match, they’re annoyed and they’re telling everyone they know. And, oh, by the way, when they get the chance they’re walking.

9. **When you make a mistake – right the wrong.** If you've got egg on your face, for whatever the reason, admit it. Then right the wrong. There's nothing more grossly frustrating to customers than a company who does something wrong then is either clueless about what they did or won't admit that they faltered.
10. **Work to believe.** Very little shreds of respect remain, if any, after we've put customers through the third degree that many experience when they encounter a glitch in our products and services and actually need to return a product, put in a claim or use the warranty service. As tempting as it is to debate customers to uphold a policy to the letter of the law, suspend the cynicism and work to believe your customers. Most are going to honestly relay what is happening to them with your product and service. And because of all the 'ifs, ands, and buts' in our policies we've conditioned customers to come in with their dukes up when they have a problem. With good reason. We've programmed our frontline to be cynical of customers through the creation of policies that protect the corporation from the lack of judgment of the minority. Work to eliminate the question of doubt about your customers' integrity. It will do wonders for the attitude and actions that your frontline brings to their interactions with customers.

Getting Customers to Love You.

The outcome of our inability to work together is the gift we give our customers. We force our customers into navigating our organization charts just to get what they need from us. The end result of their experience is usually not planned. It's the defaulted experience that comes from the customer receiving the individually planned and executed tactics and actions of each separate area of our companies. These come together in a seemingly dim-witted chain of events that has the customer thinking; "Do they talk to each other,": "What are they thinking," and "Why do I have to take this anymore?" Customers vote with their feet and decide if they will stay or leave based on their perception of how much we value them and how we treat them. And more are leaving every day just because of our inability to do the basic blocking and tackling of delivering our products and services to them.

So, getting customers to love you has got to start with showing them the respect they deserve by making it painless and eventually a joy to do business with you.

About the Author

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This first appeared in DestinationCRM:

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