Get Complains, Win Customers

Studies show that only 4% or so of dissatisfied customers ever give you a feedback about their issue. The other96% either vote with their feet, or will never come back. More than that, the dissatisfied customers will make sure that their friends and relatives also do not visit you. They typically tell eight to ten people about their problem. Why won’t they complain to you and let you know they are dissatisfied?

There are two reasons why customers don’t complain, or don’t give you the feedback you say you would like. First, it is hard to complain. To complain, you have to reveal a piece of your emotional self. People do not easily share feelings with others unless some relationship is established between them. To look someone in the eye and say I am not satisfied is not only unusual, but very difficult for most people to do. Voting with our feet is the majority way.

Second, employees rarely encourage feedback. Why? Many employees have trouble hearing a complaint as feedback. Instead, they hear it as a personal attack on their self-esteem. They cannot differentiate between issues related to their jobs and who they are personally.



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Consider the case when customers who have an issue they do not want to deal with, meet employees who do not want to hear the issue. If at all a customer hears anything from an employee, it is usually a rhetorical, commonplace question: How was your lunch?', 'How was your stay?' or 'Is everything okay here?"

These questions do not seek answers. In fact, many employees time the delivery of the question in such a way that an answer would be practically impossible. You can almost hear the employee saying, 'Well, I finally got that over with. If they are not satisfied now, it's their problem.' Sometimes it is even 'Go to hell!'

How can you win such dissatisfied customers over through soliciting more complaints? The title of this article is very unconvincing, isn't it? Traditional thinking tells you that when complaints are less, you get more customers. Right? But, no, you have to get more complaints to know what really goes on in your customers' minds. It helps you to keep ahead with changing times. Customer minds are not static.

How many companies do you think or know where complaints are encouraged? In

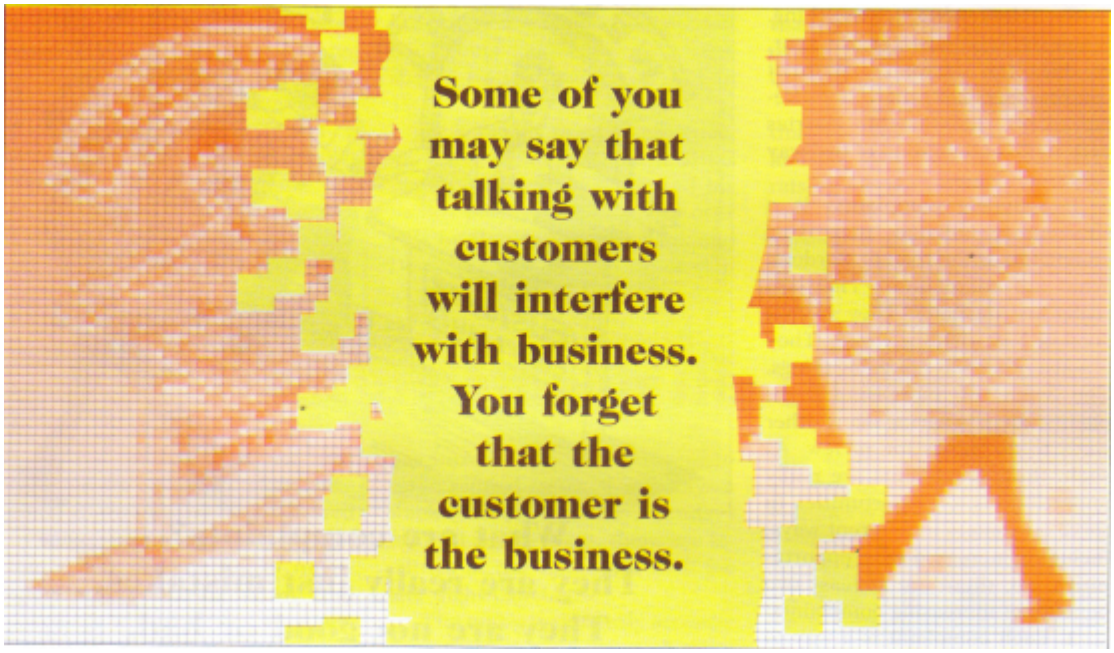
defence of employees, I have heard of very few organisations who relish complaints. Most employees can get away with bringing one complaint to their supervisor in any couple of months' time. But what about bringing in that second complaint? In most cases, that will never come up! Employees just cannot persuade themselves to bring in a second complaint.

All supervisors are taught a kind of patronising, parental look that they reserve for times like this -typical to our management style. It says, 'What are you doing so wrong that two customers have complained in the last two months? About that time signs go up everywhere in the organisation: Improve customer service! Reduce complaints!

An employee, even if only half able, is certainly not going to bring two complaints to the supervisor again. He will reduce complaints, all right. But you will never hear about another one! For those of you whose product is a service, or products requiring after sales service, your relationship with customers is everything. In effect, building the relationship is the sale. A manufacturer ships his product through a distribution network for delivery to the customer; you deliver your product yourselves. And in many instances, you continue delivering it in person as long as the customer is using your service.

So, relationship is everything. When the relationship turns sour, so does the customer. Without eliciting feedback, there is no relationship. Relationship carries with it the connotation of two-way communication.

If reducing complaints is a shortcut to oblivion, increasing complaints is the road to stardom. What are complaints? They are really just mistakes. They are not good or bad, right or wrong. They are just other ways of doing things. The value of increasing complaints, then, is having many other ways to do things for review. As such, these complaints are really opportunities opportunities to serve customers in different ways, including increased sales opportunities. So, there are at least two benefits of increasing complaints:



1. Each complaint is a way to serve a customer differently and, as such, a potential new sales opportunity. The feedback we hear from customers may lead to expanding our services to them or even creating new services.

2. Emphasising complaints as feedback tells employees that this is a customer-focused culture: ‘We view our customers as partners, we want to build relationships with them. On the other hand, if you tell employees to give good customer service and reduce complaints, you are telling them, something quite different. Aren’t you suggesting that customer feedback can be detrimental to their jobs?

As explained, the fastest way to develop a customer-focused culture is through generating complaints. So, how do you solicit more complaints? You can begin by communicating to employees the need to form relationships with customers, to view them as partners. A partnership implies feedback.

How can employees elicit more feedback from customers? If employees can facilitate the expression of complaints, 90% of your customers will air their issues. Instead of voting with their feet, customers will stand and be counted.

Here are five points to help employees encourage complaints:

1. You can help them view complaints as an avenue to win more customers. Complaints are just other ways of doing things.

2. The organisation’s culture may have to be adjusted a little to reinforce the perception of complaints as winning strategies and opportunities. Employees can be challenged to see how many complaints they can generate in one month. Supervisors can be vocal in their approval of top performers.

3. Customers will start talking when there’s a willingness to listen when they are encouraged to respond. Instead of ‘How is your lunch?’ you might ask, ‘What one thing could we do to improve your meal? Instead of ‘How was your stay?’ you might ask, “What one thing could we have done to improve your stay? And so on. The question “What one thing….?” invites a response and an opinion. This is perhaps one reason why many hotels keep questionnaires in their rooms.

4. You can encourage employees to write down customer issues; this is valuable information. And if the issue cannot be immediately responded to by the employee, a response should be guaranteed within two days. Even if you cannot resolve the issue ultimately, you owe the customer a response. Some of you will argue that this involves a lot of work. You are right, it does. Some others will say that it’s hard to do at peak times.. Such people forget that words can be modified to accommodate each situation when there is a genuine interest to listen. Some of you may say that talking with customers will interfere with business. You forget that the customer is the business.

5. Even if nothing else happens as a result of this process, at least your customers will be experiencing a customer-focused culture. Now you might wonder what can be done with all this feedback, right? There are a number of outstanding measurement opportunities that accrue from this process.

One of the biggest difficulties in measuring quality of service is in determining which employees are delivering how much customer service. Most measurements pertain to groups of people. Reviewing the number of complaints (or winning opportunities as we call them) generated by each employee will give you an idea of which employees are engaging in the process. If someone is not getting complaints, what is blocking the customer feedback? Any You can also go a step further by periodically measuring the effectiveness of the process. A short questionnaire can be sent to customers thanking them for their feedback. In addition, it could ask: How satisfied are you with the resolution of your issue? How well did the employee handle the transaction? This system, then, provides two measures of employee effectiveness:

How effectively the employee builds relationships with customers (with a particular focus on those with unresolved issues); and How the customers (potentially a group you could lose) rate employee attitudes and behaviours. You can also gauge how effectively the process creates new business from existing customers. If you test the process with one- half of the organisation, you can compare some of your usual measures for incremental business to see if significant differences exist between the two halves. You can also compare your measures for lost business.

If your business already employs branch or division customer service measures, you would expect these measures to improve the branches or divisions engaging in the process. Results can also be compared to individual employee sales figures. Is there a correlation between employees' quality of service and their sales success?

In most organisations, the top 10% of employees deliver the best service. They are the same employees who are very visible, earning the most recognition and receiving most of the promotions. This strategy gives you access to the other 90 percent. How much service is being delivered, how often, and by how many employees? If you utilise these measurement techniques, you are going to end up with a ranking of people in accordance with their ability to deliver consistently high service quality. You could correlate this ranking with direct revenue-producing measures of the organisation.

So what do you do now? Some employees apparently work more effectively with customers than others not exactly startling in- formation, except that now you know relatively which ones deliver quality service and which do not. You end up with two major opportunities:

How can we convince those on the lower half of the spectrum to significantly improve their service quality?

How can we challenge those on the top half to improve their already comparatively high service quality?

You know it is almost impossible to motivate someone out of or beyond their own set of self-expectations. You can, however, present a winning strategy for change. In this case, the feedback from the customers. The feedback alone would prompt improvement in many individuals. The fact that these are customer-driven measures further improves the credibility of the feedback in the employee's mind.

The various measures mentioned here also point to a variety of related skills. Some of these skills can be addressed as behavioural changes; others involve more fundamental attitude changes. Perhaps a master concept can be utilised to develop the variety of service quality skills necessary for top performance. The ongoing measures described are themselves a master test. The scores they provide point to differential levels of mastery on the part of each employee.

A training programme with several modules will facilitate an individualised programme for each person. An employee participates only in the modules where improvement is indicated. Subsequent ongoing service quality measures will portray the new mastery level for each.

The effectiveness of the service quality process is not only continually correlated with revenue- oriented measures, but is in itself also a continuous improvement cycle.

To encourage employees to continuously improve their service quality, three levels of mastery might be defined. A symbol recognising each employee’s service quality proficiency can be presented for display in each person’s work area. The symbol acts as a reminder to each award recipient of the proficiency he or she has demonstrated and that even higher levels of attainment are possible.

With a process in place that identifies, measures, improves and rewards continuous improvement in individual service quality, it might be interesting to look at the profile of the people in customer interaction points. How did those people get there? Whose values do they reflect? Their own? The person’s who hired them? The screening process”? The organisation’s?

Do those who score higher on individual service quality measures have a different profile from those in the bottom rung? Are there correlations between these scores and other aspects of performance, such as performance reviews, absenteeism, and turnover?

If testing is used as part of the interview process, do the test scores correlate with the service. quality measures? Perhaps an opportunity exists to evaluate our choices for high customer contact points in ways that will further improve service quality.

The result of this get-complaints-win-customers strategy is a customer-focused

culture where complaints are viewed as a prime source of opportunities. It not only helps keep the focus on the customer, but the amount of verbatim information available directly from customers will astound you. And, this, you know is a must for organisations to get ahead under the existing competitive framework.



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