Marketing Asking for Trouble?

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Cultivating customer complaints seems to be the latest wave to sweep the business community today. In the past few years, we learned to survive the sharks while swimming with them, knocked ourselves out in search of excellence, took pride in increased productivity, thrived on chaos, and managed to make it work with management by walking around.

Now that time has run out on the one-minute manager, there is a new fad ready to revolutionize the way we do business by saving us from our never-ending stupidity.

We are now being exhorted to create a great fanfare and march out amid our customers, urging them to give us both their business and their gripes. Most car companies and even dealers do this kind of management to build loyalty and win customers for life. It is even suggested that there is a direct connection between the number of complaints we can turn up and the amount of business that will come our way.

At first glance, the idea of creating an avenue for customers to let us know what they don’t like may sound creative. The idea is based on the premise that most customers don’t complain when they have a problem or encounter poor service. They simply take their business elsewhere. Research shows that only 4% of dissatisfied customers ever come back and say they have a problem. More damaging. every dissatisfied customer will turn away at least 20 prospective customers while only three or four customers are won through a satisfied customer!

If we can get our customers to part with their complaints, we can make the necessary changes and serve them better. Like so many other ideas, there is an element of truth to the suggestion that service improvement and customer retention can come from understanding and responding to complaints. Only if we are aware of what is wrong can we fix it.

Even though the cultivation of complaints may be somewhere out on the so-called ‘cutting edge,’ this type of thinking is a double-edged sword and the blade cuts more than one way.

Let us say you buy a new car and I am your auto dealer. A month or so after you have had the car, I call you and ask you to spend a few minutes answering my queries. At that point, I begin a systematic re- view of the various parts of the car: doors, windows, paint, air conditioning system, steering wheel, radio etc.

Piece by piece, I ask you to tell me what is wrong. By the time I am halfway through the list, you have come to an unavoidable (and indelible) conclusion-you bought a lemon, and you want your money back.

You are not only infuriated by the product, you are ready to take me to court for selling you a piece of junk.

This is precisely the difficulty of focusing on negative issues. The process serves to create and shape perceptions, and perceptions become reality.

On the other hand, if I were to ask you to spend the same amount of time describing what you like about your new car and about my dealership, you will come away with just the opposite conclusion. Your perception of the car will be almost entirely positive. Once the positive image has been shaped, I will then ask you about any problems you have encountered or com plaints you may have.

Unfortunately, those who advocate the cult of complaints believe that creating a customer catharsis is somehow healthy for a business. Although it may sound somewhat avantgarde, the premise is actually faulty. Reinforcing negative perceptions can be devastating, because once people are committed to their complaints, it is impossible to alter their views.

The issue is not to avoid legitimate customer complaints. But in the long run, it is far more beneficial to know and understand what customers like, what brings them back, what causes them to want to do business with a particular firm. Fostering a complaint-filled environment will not help reach this goal.

Establishing the perception that a company cares for its customers, that it is genuinely interested in what they think about its business, is more important than a complaint. The fact that you make a genuine effort to communicate is most basic of all.

It is important to identify problem areas so that they can be corrected as quickly as possible. Providing easy access and frustration- free avenues for customers to

communicate their problems is essential.

At the same time, creating and building positive perceptions about your company is absolutely fundamental if you want to obtain feedback for making improvements while maintaining strong, enduring customer relationships.

This positive picture is your most effective defense against com- plaints becoming disruptive and even destructive.

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