



Like Driving With The Rearview Mirror



Coddling customers can sometimes seem like an enormous and expensive undertaking, but more and more success-driven companies are looking for creative ways to become more customer focused.

You've heard ad nauseam about identifying, finding and pursuing your target prospects and how you may, through strategic marketing planning, entice the prospects to try your business. As a business person you may feel that once you've got them in the door they will automatically love the image you've created, and things will move along nicely in the relationship building process.

However, the truth is that once you've convinced them to give you a try, the challenge will be to create what business guru Ken Blanchard once referred to as "Raving Fans"; your preachers or advocates.

Understand that the "customer experience" is the new competitive battleground. Tom Knighton, head of the customer experience consulting firm Forum Corp., says: "It's where business is going to be won or lost. It is the customer-focused companies that will emerge victorious in the battleground to attract and keep customers."

It really comes down to giving your customers what they want, not just what you as businesses can sell them. What can you do to make people's lives better? What experience can you provide that will live on with the customer long after you are out of the picture? Unless you can create an atmosphere (through customer-focused management) and employ the type of folks that are willing to deliver great service, all your other so-called marketing initiatives will be for nothing. Your people have to put the customer first, and you must lead them.

While researching for a recent presentation for the hospitality industry, I discovered that empathy was one of the most admired traits that customers identified with when staying at hotels. Many travel industry employees have no idea what the traveler is going through. Some visionary companies have created orientation programs that help workers understand what it feels like to be a guest far from home in unfamiliar surroundings. The most important thing that you can do for customers is to make them feel cared for as individuals. That means sweating the details and always looking for ways to provide extra customer care. It should become your company's culture and must align with your customer's thinking and needs.

Remember, the customer determines the expectations of your company. Image leads to perceptions which lead to expectations, which will in turn determine the actual experience. It is your task then to anticipate their needs even before the customer experiences your product or service. Look at it this way -- waiting for requests from your customers is kind of like driving with your rearview mirror. Anticipate their needs and win customer loyalty.

The fact is that what people will talk about long after the experience is not whether your company is good or better than the competition, but rather that you provided a remarkable experience for them. One great experience with a customer can create lasting loyalty and word of mouth. And loyalty is the prize beyond satisfied. Sale guru Jeffery Gitomer sums it up this way: "Would you prefer your partner was loyal or satisfied?" Kinda says it all, doesn't it?