

Are You Really Customer Focused?

A recent headline in a major newspaper ought to take the award for stating the blindingly obvious: “Customers the key, says visitor”. We probably don’t need an international expert to tell us this, because we all run customer-focused businesses. Don’t we?

Let’s review what we all know about customers and clients:

- └ They’re always right – even when they’re not
- └ They always come first
- └ Our mission is to “add value” to them
- └ Feedback from dissatisfied customers is more valuable than feedback from happy clients
- └ 1 grumpy customer will tell 7 people why they’re dissatisfied, whereas happy customers tell 2
- └ We aim to turn our customers into our salesforce

Check? So why is it that often what happens in practice goes against what we know to be true:

- └ Customer service staff regarding customers as unwanted intrusions on their working day
- └ Dissatisfied customers take up a lot of your time, and some of them simply can’t be satisfied
- └ Prospects just don’t seem to be smart enough to understand the value of the product/service we have to offer
- └ We’ve revamped our marketing material with new colours, sharper branding and the impact has been minimal
- └ We’ve just brought in new or upgraded products/services but they don’t seem to be moving as fast as they ought to given how good they are
- └ Customers are only interested in price

Customer focus is one of those things that all businesses would claim to have but few of us experience as customers. For example, even though we give people our names on our EFTPOS and credit cards when we pay for services, how many salespeople actually use your name when they say thank you?

It is more than compliance with scripts or remembering to smile. In particular, it is hard for people who do not deal directly with customers to achieve it. It has to be at the forefront of our minds all the time, but how do we achieve that?

The key is to look at everything in our business from the point of view “how does a customer experience this?”

Most of us have had to be concerned about making a process or a product work properly from a technical perspective. It's easy then to lose sight of the customer's experience. For many of us, that internal focus flows through into our marketing material.

Here's a simple test for your marketing material (your brochures, a printout of your website etc). Get a blue highlighter and mark all those phrases that are about you and your product. Get a yellow highlighter and mark all the material that relates to your customers and their need. Which colour dominates?

Here's another test. Go to www.futurenowinc.com/wewe.htm and try the customer focus calculator. This little tool calculates the number of times your website talks about your company (it also works with marketing text of any kind) as a percentage of all the text.

Genuine customer focus is not just about politeness to customers. It's also a curiosity about who are customers are, what other needs and wants we can meet, and where we can find more customers like them. How many businesses know where their new customers come from? How many businesses which rely on word of mouth have referral systems in place? How many businesses start with product or service features and then work out what need they might meet?

Customer focus is a bit like the weather: everyone talks about it but no one does anything about it. Of course most of try to focus on our customers, but simply improving our service levels is not enough. In any business, there is *always* potential to improve our focus on the customer focus, even if we do not change our service standards. In fact, we might decide that, given our particular business, our service standards are perfectly appropriate for our customers' needs. Lifting the standards might not only be a waste of money, it might put our customers off. You won't know until you have really understood your customers' need and put products, systems and processes in place that meet **their** need, rather than your own.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to stand in your customer's shoes, and see your business the way they do. Being successful in business is about taking on the hard things as well as doing the easy stuff.

This article first appeared in Westpac's "Good Business" magazine.

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