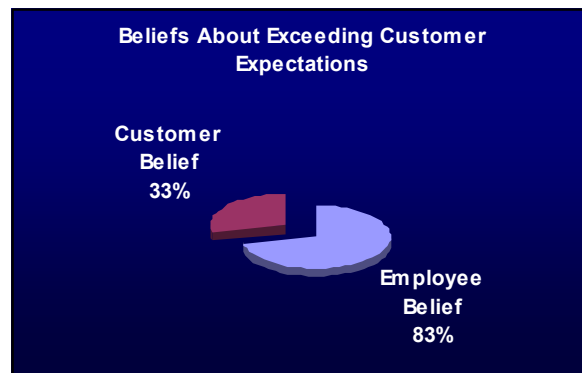


Defining a Great Customer Experience

Customer expectations are not always the same as yours

While consulting with a client of mine who was Vice President of Sales for a financial services company, I asked him what he believed his customers thought of his company and how they liked doing business with him. His answer was that his customers loved his company and their experiences were very positive. I then spoke to his sales people to learn more about their existing sales processes as well as other sales-related issues. What came out of those interviews was only slightly different from their boss regarding their customers' experiences. The sales reps' feelings were similar to their vice president, although not quite as over-confident and smug. Where they differed related to the fact that they did get some complaints from customers, but not enough for them to believe the customers had anything but excellent experiences with their company. They too believed that their customers liked their company and enjoyed doing business with them.

Finally, I was able to speak with several of their customers. To no surprise, I got a 180-degree opposite opinion. The customers I spoke with felt that this financial services company was lacking in several areas of customer service. They complained about the sales process, transacting the sale, the lack of follow up, caring about the customers after the sale, and lots more. Basically, they felt totally different than the VP of



of Sales and, to a large degree, his own sales team. In essence, the customer experience was vastly different than what their vendor actually thought it was, and that was resulting in poor customer retention.

What's the difference between over-the-counter drugs and prescription drugs? Over-the-counter drugs are bought as a result of your own self-diagnosis, while prescription drugs are obtained as a result of seeing a medical professional, aka your doctor. In business, you can self-diagnose your own problems and develop or create your own solution. This is often a satisfactory route for simpler problems and issues. But for more serious problems, like customer service and customer retention, you are better off seeing a trained professional. Unfortunately for my client, and for many other businesses, he was self-diagnosing his own problem of poor customer retention and wasn't succeeding since

the problem was getting worse. As the saying goes, when you're too close to the forest to see the trees, get the heck out of the forest. In other words, it's time to get help from the outside.

Strativity Group conducted a three-year study with 4,496 participants; 42% were employees from B2B, B2C and services industries, and 58% were the customers of those employees. The participants were asked to rank the quality of the customer experience they provide or receive. Both employees and customers were asked to respond to the same questions. The results were quite interesting. While 83% of employees responded with the strong conviction that they exceed customer expectations, only 33% of their customers agreed with the same statement.

Similarly, 89% of the employees strongly believed that they use their common sense and discretion in the way they deal with customers. Only 44% of their customers agreed with the same statement. In the area of defining the experience, employees consistently ranked their performance higher than their customers did, with an average gap of 35%. The study clearly demonstrates that employees and customers have completely different definitions of a great customer experience and therefore produce unacceptable results. The cause of the problem was that customer experiences were never clearly defined for the employees who participated in the study (as is true for many companies today). The definition of a good customer experience was left to the personal interpretation of each employee, which created misunderstandings and discrepancies in performance.

Employees need the customer knowledge necessary to deliver optimal customer experiences and stop believing in their own interpretations which, according to the study, are misaligned with the customers' expectations. While 70% of the employees in the study were convinced that they understood the customers' pains and issues, only 38% of the customers agreed with the same statement. While employees often receive skills training on using tools and handling transactions, they may only receive vague and undefined information on customer experiences and customer knowledge.

Learning about customer expectations goes beyond just surveys. The customer experience must have clearly defined performance descriptions (exactly what the employee has to do), clear measurements (how do we know when we get there), and employee education programs (teach me how). You must define the experience you want your employees to deliver based on your customers' expectations. Only then can you bridge the gap between the customer and your employees.

Talking to your customers about their expectations is critical for understanding what they are looking for in a good customer experience. Ask them tough questions such as:

- How likely are you to be a customer of ours one year from now? Why or why not?
- How likely are you to refer our product or company to a colleague or friend? Why or why not?

- If you knew then what you know now about us, how likely would you be to choose us as your supplier? In other words, would you make the same decision given what you currently know about us and our products?
- Why do you continue doing business with us?
- When it's time to renew or reorder from us, do you evaluate other companies or products?
- If your purchasing manager, department head, or whoever makes the purchasing decision, were to leave your company today, would you continue purchasing from us as you have in the past or would you evaluate other suppliers?

Answers to these questions, and others like them, will give you a world of insight into how your customers perceive your company and its employees. With this valuable feedback you can then construct a viable customer experience plan and train your employees on how to execute this plan.

At a time when customer experiences are the next competitive battle, successful businesses need to launch a new approach to customer experience execution. They can't afford to leave their employees guessing as to what experience their customers want. Every employee's actions can either build or destroy customer loyalty. Make sure they have the right information, training and ammunition for maximizing the customer experience.

Good luck and good selling!

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