

Would *you* do business with you?

Every company's success depends on its ability to provide top-notch customer service. That requires hard work, determination and management in three key areas — process, outcome and perception.

By Pamela Schuck

(Part one in a three-part series)

Would you do business with yourself? To really evaluate your business, it's a question every owner must answer. Think like your prospective or current customers and ask yourself the question often. And be honest.

Are there things that happen, from occasionally to frequently, that influence the answer to be a resounding "No?"

If so, it's time to examine why distinctive quality service is important. First, recognize who your competitors are. It's not just your business competitors. For service excellence, you compete with anyone who gives your customers service.

Customers expect service experiences. They get them from restaurants, amusement parks, theater productions, retail stores and cruises. They rate your service on how they like to be treated by experience providers. Simple satisfaction is not good enough; customers expect to be wowed.

It's critical, then, that you understand how to dissect the customer experience into two parts — process and outcome — because customers judge service quality differently than product quality.

The process encompasses the service quality provided in the experience. It's the method you use to offer your customer experiences. The process can be positive, negative or in between. You must manage this process.

When you need to renew your driver's license, do you look forward to the experience? I don't. That's because the process is not a positive experience. I experience unclear direction, long lines, negative attitudes and indifference to my questions or needs.

The outcome is the product quality. It determines whether the customer received the product expected, along with the quality of the product expected.

When I take my car in for service for an annoying sound, I receive recognition of who I am and what I purchased, respect for my problem, responsiveness to my time constraints and even little touches like coffee and a washed car.

Let's examine those two experiences.

The process was negative in the first, but I did get the product I needed and wanted. Judged on the outcome alone, it was successful. But the process was negative and influences how I came to be an unsatisfied customer.

The process of the second was very positive, but when I get in the clean car and hear the annoying sound as I drive home, the outcome is not of the quality expected.

What does that mean? It means your customer judges both parts of the experience and weighs whether to give you his or her business again. That doesn't mean, however, that failure to deliver on one section will preclude your customer from returning.

In fact, in the two examples, the second experience is more easily reconciled. Because the process was so positive, it is easier for a customer to willingly work with the service provider to turn the outcome around.

With a negative process, customers are more apt to become difficult customers and therefore unwilling to give the service provider any chance at repair.

Of course, if you have a negative process and a negative outcome, you have some serious issues with the impact of customer loyalty and your business will not prosper with poor service to the customer.

In managing the process of the customer experience, you must always know and see the customer's perception. Customers are satisfied by their needs and wants, not by what you want their wants and needs to be. The success of the process and the outcome are determined by the customer's perception. Your customer always views it as his perception and his reality.

You can adjust customer perceptions, but only after you are sure what they are.

First, learn what they see and why they see it that way. Then compare your perceptions to your customer's and determine where the differences are. Finally, work to change your customer's perceptions of your business.

What picture do you paint for your customers?

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