

10 Steps to a Better Customer Experience

By: Bill Shulby
bill_shulby@unc.edu

What can your company do right now to improve the customer experience and increase customer satisfaction and retention? It need not be a lengthy system integration or organizational overhaul.

Most companies gain mileage by adhering to the basics, “adhering” being the operative term. Our “10 Easy Fixes” contain some things that may be done in a week and some that take longer. But even the most complex often involve no more than a new perspective on things you already are (or should be) doing.

1. Identify your top customers, laminate the list and give it to every employee.

We used this as a “starter” for a business-to-business client’s shipping and receiving department and its repair department. Now top customers get their machines serviced and shipped faster than customers that contribute less to the bottom line.

This goes back to a fact we all know: Most of your employees want to do a good job. This technique simply helps them know where to give the extra focus. Communication of the list to executives is not sufficient. Every employee needs to know so that everyone in the organization works toward the same goals. And properly introduced, this approach ingrains a financial, contribution-oriented dimension into the thinking of employees.

This type of thinking is particularly crucial for most marketing teams. Yet this is a competency usually lacking in marketing and a key reason for marketing’s diminutive role in the boardroom.

2. Understand what “platinum service” means and document it. Even if it is not all doable today, we all do better when we have something concrete to shoot for.

3. Ask, ask, ask. You must directly ask customers what they want. In our years of experience with satisfaction, retention and loyalty research, we have yet to meet a company that was not convinced it understood its customers’ needs.

We have yet to meet one that was correct, once we did the objective research. Many think that dialogue with customers opens Pandora’s box. History shows that few customers are more loyal than one who has complained and had the complaint answered. Worried you won’t be able to respond? Research shows that simply asking

raises satisfaction scores.

4. Interview five “lost” customers. This is one of the cheapest, most worthwhile investments of your time. If yours is like the vast majority of companies, the defection will have little to do with your product or core service. It is usually the peripherals that lose customers.

5. Walk a customer complaint through to completion. This is a tried-and-true technique from the “quality” movement. Take a single complaint from inception and hand-walk it to completion. Physically doing this, with no shortcuts, is the surest way to comprehend what your customers deal with. It usually produces obvious streamlining moves saving internal effort with simultaneous improvements on the customer side.

6. Deliver a one-page questionnaire to the sales force. Ask them to look at each step of the delivery cycle and ask how to make their customers happier.

7. Implement an employee suggestion program. When properly deployed, we’ve seen outstanding results for operational efficiency and customer relationships. There seem to be three keys: Give your employees a specific topic-area focus; don’t have an open-ended time frame — use start and stop dates to create focus; and report back on what was used and recognize contributors.

8. Spend pennies to save dollars. One of our clients needed customers to install new software on their instrumentation periodically. Though not terribly difficult, it did require the operator to stop and activate the software, thus forcing them to “do one more thing” in an already busy day.

We set it up so that once you installed the software, a “secret” code appeared on the screen. Call customer service, tell us the number and we’ll send you a T-shirt. For the price of a run of T-shirts, we cut the product adoption cycle time in half and boosted compliance from 20 percent to 80 percent.

9. Identify your “lighthouse” customers. You probably have some customers with constant demands/complaints who always want what amounts to “special service.” If you follow a policy of “grin and bear it,” you lose out on both ends of the equation. These squeaky-wheel customers always fall into one of two categories.

One category is more advanced than most of your customers and points the way to being ahead of your competition in terms of market needs. Cultivate relationships with these “lighthouse customers” and leverage their expertise to guide your own product/service development.

The other group is outside of your target market and never will be satisfied with your service because it is not intended for them. Regardless of how it looks on paper, you’re probably losing money on them long term as they siphon resources that could be better used on core customers. Help them find a better supplier. Your credibility will be so high that you’ll be able to keep the part of their business that you can serve profitably, turning a headache into a profit.



10. Use mystery shoppers. This technique is well known in retail, but nothing prevents its use in other industries. Shop yourself and the competition. Find out how easy your company is to do business with versus your competitors. Identify strengths and weaknesses in the customer experience you offer and that offered by competitors.

We once called a potential vendor for CRM call center software and found that its IVR allowed no path for speaking to a human. How could any customer take CRM advice from a company that doesn't practice what it preaches?

Bill Shulby is president of Customer Asset Management Co. and adjunct professor of marketing at the University of North Carolina. His e-mail address is bill_shulby@unc.edu. Cliff Scott is an expert in customer satisfaction measurement. His e-mail address is Drclifford@earthlink.net.