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5 things your customers want from you

After a long absence from blogging (again), I've compiled a short list of the 5 things your customers want from you and they have nothing to do with web2.0, social bookmarking, widgets, marklets, CSS, RSS, Ajax or search engine optimization. In fact this post formed in my mind over the course of buying a new house, moving into it, and selling the old condo.

In other words, these 5 factors became evident to me offline, in the bricks and mortar world, and in keeping with my tired old view that "there is no such thing as The New Economy", it all translates back into things I can take back to the online world I live in.

The five things:

1. Customers want to be heard and have their communications with you acknowledged.

Sounds pretty self-explanatory, who in their right mind wouldn't do this? Well, all sorts of people. In the offline world it's the contractors who kept leaving the front door to my new house open after I told them not to do that. It's the painter who walks into the place with his boots on and upon being told "please remove your boots until you get a drop sheet down" and being told in response "oh, well these boots aren't dirty". That's not listening to your customer.

Meanwhile, back on the web, I've been emailing a private US agency about an immigration issue. It's been proceeding as planned, but they never even acknowledge receiving email. I sent them a short "here's my new address, and btw, how's this stuff going?" and not getting any cursory response until a form letter (the next step in the process) showed up at our new address.

It doesn't matter if you're doing what your customer wants you to do, you have to tell them you are doing it or they are going to feel like they aren't being acknowledged or listened to.

2. Customers want the organization to respond to them as a unified whole.

You read a lot of things about why small companies have advantages over the behemoths, most of them centering around agility, but this is also a contributing factor. It's easier for a smaller company to respond to the customer as a single unit than it is for the 800 pound gorillas. So when an 800 pound gorilla pulls it off, it impresses me.

Example: ADT. When I booked a test on the alarm system at the new house, the technician told me:

"we're getting a fault on zone 14, which is your basement motion detector, probably a battery needs replacing, 3 Volt lithium. We can't proceed until you replace that battery, but I'll be here until 10pm tonight, my direct extension is...."

Several hours later, I call back and navigate the voice mail labyrinth precisely as she told me, but got some other guy on the line...

"she's doing another test right now, and has another booked afterwards. I'll find somebody else to test your circuits and we'll get you activated tonight like you wanted, by the way, did you get that battery replaced?"

I had never told this guy that I wanted to get the system activated before I left for the night, and hadn't mentioned the battery, but once one tech knew this information, it seemed the entire company did. It made me feel like I was dealing with a benevolent, competent Borg collective.

Too many companies bat their customers around like a tennis ball. "You want to pay an invoice? Ha! I just generate them, go to hell (extension 123)" with marked disinterest in their customer's situation and an ingrained "not my department" mentality.

3. Customers want explanations, not excuses.

Yeah but, yeah but, yeah but, who cares. Customers don't care. Whatever it is you're about to say to a customer that

basically distills down to "it's not my fault", your customer doesn't care. It is your fault. Doesn't matter what went wrong and how far removed that was from your direct involvement, if it happened on your watch, it's your problem.

The movers we hired were great. They explained everything that was going to happen ahead of time, offered to send somebody out in advance to review our stuff (we declined) and then went over and above the call of duty on every aspect of the move.

So even after it took more than twice as long as their phone estimate, and took over two hours to arrive at the new place ("we went one way, hit traffic, tried another way and hit more traffic, then we stopped for dinner, then we got lost, we'll knock all that time off the bill"), we still sent them on their way that night with a tip and instructions to go get themselves some cold beer after working their butts off in the unbearable heat all day.

4. Customers want their concerns addressed

Professionals and experts take note of this: you may know more about your field than your customer can ever hope to understand, but your customer knows exactly what will and won't work for them, your expert knowledge aside. So listen to your customers concerns. They probably have little to do with the subject matter and everything to do with what will and will not work for themselves.

Most people sell their house and then buy another one before the first sale closes. Some particularly masochistic people will have both deals close and have their move booked all on the same day. So we decided we would look for and buy our house, MOVE, and then sell our condo.

This resulted in huge pushback from our real estate agent. Her expertise in the field: "empty condos don't show well, the market is hot now, it won't be too difficult for you to have the condo ready while you're still living there", completely clouded out the needs of her customer: "we have a baby in the house and it's very difficult to keep the place ready for showings while we're still living here, let alone get ready for the move at the same time".

So experts remember: you may know it all, but only your customer can tell you what they really need and what works for them.

5. Customers like it when their expectations are exceeded

Numbers 4 and 5 follow from #1, because you can't do either of these if you haven't listened to your customer and acknowledged their input. Once you have done this though, it is your opportunity to shine.

Going back to the movers again. They told us everything they were going to do, and then they showed up (on time) and did more. They wrapped every stick of furniture in a tarp and taped them up. They wrapped the sofas and the mattresses in cellophane. They brought in portable wardrobes with the expectation that they (not us) would load all the clothes from the closets into them. In short, they blew us away.

Promise less, deliver more is an old adage, but it still rocks the customer's boat.

I like to think my own business does these five things already. As I thought about these factors, once again it becomes apparent to me that there is no magic pixie dust to doing business on the net, and that it is really no different that doing business anywhere else. That is because doing business is not about clicks or conversions, retention, churn rates or burn rates, it's about the fair exchange of value.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in Living off the net at 14:24