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MARKET FOCUS: Hearing the customer out

Craig McGuire - 23 Feb 2004 00:00

Communicating may be an integral part of PR, but so is listening.

Despite being the essence of customer-facing communications, collecting customer feedback has traditionally fallen beyond the reach of the communications department in most firms. But because seasoned PR professionals have several communications-related advantages over their customer-service counterparts, this area is fertile for PR pros to leave an indelible mark on the company - and one that many feel is somewhat underexploited. Many agencies, even large ones, don't offer customer-feedback expertise, though some say that if a client requested it, they would accommodate. "The problem is that the customer- service function remains separate from the communications or public relations function," says Bob Seltzer, a leader in Ruder Finn's marketing practice. "I defy anyone to explain the wisdom of this. How a company talks to its customers is among, if not the, most critical communications it has." **Gathering feedback** Essentially, customer feedback involves any business process that requests, collects, and analyzes responses received from customers, incorporating both kudos and complaints. In the past, this involved primarily some form of call center-type scenario where customers phone in to report complaints, and customer-service representatives funnel those barbs up the line to management. But the advent of the internet provided another medium for gathering customer feedback. And, especially in the last few years, a whole host of other products and technological innovations have emerged. Now, customer relationship management (CRM) applications that integrate with a company's IT systems enable an employee in one location to immediately call up the complete history of a customer from another area entirely. Still, before a company invests in a big-ticket CRM application, there are several other techniques and strategies PR professionals can advise. Seltzer explains that communications professionals need to espouse the virtues of maintaining multiple modes of customer feedback to ensure that a healthy stream of input finds its way into the company. This includes both proactive (asking for it) and reactive (responding when it comes in unsolicited) channels. "Methods of getting feedback range from asking customers to fill out surveys, posting a phone number, reviewing incoming calls and letters, and many other methods," Seltzer said. "It's imperative, however, that the customer-service function, which often includes trainees taught to handle frequently raised issues and common questions, knows when and how to raise things to the level of the PR pro because the issue might have larger overtones to it." But if the idea of launching any customer-relations program is daunting, it's possible to do it on a relatively small scale and still make it meaningful. In the absence of a comprehensive, well-rounded customer service program that addresses all customer inquiries, a company should at least be interacting with its best return clientele. "In many companies, the traditional mathematical formula fits: 80% of purchases are made by 20% of their customers," Seltzer says. "Therefore, it is critically important that those customers not only be happy, but also get a response whenever they

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raise an issue or express a viewpoint." Andy Hopson, president and CEO, Northeast region of Burson-Marsteller, points out to his account managers that the best advice to give to clients is to look within the company for access points that can be leveraged. Usually, he says, this involves encouraging clients to expand the quintessential customer feedback vehicle: the "Contact Us" section on the client's website. "We advise them to expand the section to include complaint, question, and compliment areas," Hopson says. "We also stress the importance of responding in a personable way, and as quickly as possible." But, Hopson clarifies, soliciting customer feedback should not just be relegated to a standalone site feature, such as the Contact Us page; it should be woven through other sections where customers are required to key in information. This includes site registration and membership areas, as well as sections where they have to sign up for services and subscriptions. Clients also should be encouraged to introduce survey-based features alongside content promoting brands, products and services, Hopson adds. In actuality, unless the client has the luxury of a specially dedicated department in-house complete with the appropriate expertise and resources, gathering and analyzing all of the information a client gets from customers - not to mention actually using that data - is always challenging. "It is a struggle; aligning online and offline feedback is a challenge," Hopson says. "Ideally, [PR people] would work with database marketing specialists and business software companies while designing websites and thinking of marketing/sales goals. These specialists can set up e-systems that will route messages to the right departments and allow companies to meet customer needs efficiently." This also can help the company identify the most cost-effective CRM systems (i.e., online mechanisms might be cheaper than the phone) and transfer customer comments to these channels, Hopson adds. Sunny Kobe Cook, founder of the 28-store chain Sleep Country USA, says that sometimes the simplest solutions can be the most effective - if you understand customer behavior well enough to make them work. For example, take the humble customer-feedback mailer. As Cook points out, a few simple techniques can ensure a higher return rate. "Don't rely on them to fill in their name and address," Cook says. "Believe it or not, the more unhappy they are, the less likely they are to give you that information. But our sales staff filled in a customer number on the reply portion of the form as they were writing the thank you card and addressing the envelopes. That way we always knew how to reach the customer if needed." Internally, this strategy also lets you identify the staff members who deserve recognition (sales team, delivery team, etc.) if the customer provides positive feedback, which should always be used for motivating employees. "I did this with over 70,000 customers per year for nearly a decade, and 99.9% of the feedback ran positive, so we had lots of incoming praise to pass along to our team," Cook says. Additionally, Cook employed telephone surveys as a follow up on the home deliveries. "A person worked every evening to make the calls and managed to reach about 30% of our customers," Cook says. "Professional mystery shoppers were also used monthly to ensure that customers received a consistent level of service. Again, we gave recognition for those who scored well on the mystery shopper surveys." **Technological advances** With the advantage of technology, firms today are able to interact much more effectively with their customers. This point of interaction represents an opportunity to survey customers. There are dozens of technology vendors offering a wide variety of software packages designed to retrieve and analyze customer feedback. For instance, AllDorm, a Santa Clara, CA-based company that launched in 2001 and specializes in providing products and services to college students nationwide, gained momentum by offering one-on-one communication with its customers. Rapid growth, however, would eventually make this interaction challenging. "We had lost touch," says Ryan Garman, cofounder of AllDorm. To reconnect with its customers, AllDorm recently hired Perseus Development to build a system based on its Survey Solutions software that sends a post-order survey asking them about their experience. This system also included triggers that immediately flag dissatisfied customers. AllDorm's communications pros - who double up as customer-service representatives - then phone the disgruntled customer in person. "This closed-loop feedback and customer service takes the impersonal collection of web-page code and turns it into a customer-centric shopping environment," Garman says. Furthermore, AllDorm now has a solution that feeds useful information to not only customer service and marketing, but all communications and public relations operations. There are many best practices PR professionals would do well to promote to their clients. "Respond promptly and directly," says Hopson. "Delaying response or ignoring piling complaints can ultimately damage a company's reputation and sales." "The biggest mistake that is made in providing customer feedback is the 'response without a response,'" Seltzer says. "This is the polite kiss-off in which you acknowledge the issue a customer has raised, thank them for bringing it to your attention, but offer no solutions to fix the situation." These types of responses can do more harm than good, unless the situation raised is either non-addressable or it is deemed that the customer's view of the issue is vastly different from what the company perceives or evidence indicates. The benefits of listening to your customer, and responding in turn, were made clear in Burson's 2001 e-fluentials survey, which showed even then - before today's proliferation of weblogs - that influencers, or opinion leaders in the online community, share a bad experience they had with a company with 17 people. Conversely, if they have a positive experience, they tell it to 11 people. With e-fluentials word travels fast and far. "There is probably nothing that makes a user feel better than to raise an issue and see the company respond in a way that indicates change," Seltzer concludes. "When that is able to happen, you may have a customer for life."

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