

## **Success Begins and Ends With Our Customers**

*Why Customer-Generated Feedback Plays an Integral Role in the Future of our Companies*

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As businesses continue to climb out of economic rut, it's easy to blame the state of the market and external variables for declining sales. But the truth is that many of the obstacles a company faces come from within the organization itself.

Although we cannot regulate the economy, we have the ability to control our company's culture and we are wholly responsible for creating an environment that enables creativity and promotes positive growth. When we seek to maximize sales, rather than looking towards the market to recover, we should be asking, "Where does my company stand to improve?"

Acknowledging your business's shortcomings may be uncomfortable, but an organization's internal conditions build the backbone of a company. Much like a home, the success of your company is based on the strength of its foundation, and it's critical for a company's foundation to be strong enough to survive a challenging economy.

Once we've decided to adapt to the changing needs of our industry and embrace an internal culture of innovation, the question becomes, "How do we begin to acclimatize and re-align business practices and solutions to meet the demands of an evolving market?" Ironically, some of the answers to overcoming internal barriers come from an outside variable— our customers.

### **How the Customer "Hires" Your Company**

To address a wide array of needs in the market, a company must first understand what role the company plays in meeting the needs of the customer. In other words, how do your company's offerings help position customers for continued success, and how does your company do this better than your competitors? What are the value drivers for your customers and how does your company deliver upon these requirements?

The customer has a need that must be filled, so they seek partners to help them fill that void. However, the marketplace is filled with choices, creating a very competitive environment.

When the customer looks to fill that void, he or she follows the same thought process your company follows when hiring a new employee. When your company interviews a potential hire, you consider whether this person shares your vision, if this person is equipped to help your business meet its goals and whether this person will contribute to the success you are targeting. In selling our products to our customers, in a sense, our company and its offerings are being interviewed. Essentially, the customer seeks to choose a partner that will align with its goals.

To assess the needs of our customers, a productive way to gauge their interests is to collect customer feedback. When businesses incorporate customer feedback, their solutions are shown to them in a new light, allowing the company to improve and become more relevant to its customers. This "enlightened" perspective allows businesses to provide the services their customers need to be successful in the

marketplace. Customers' business decisions drive the trends in our industry, which will ultimately set the market landscape, and in becoming more in-tune with their needs, businesses can gain an inside track in order to better serve their customers.

Customer feedback doesn't just apply to products and services. It also applies to marketing and sales engagement. How do you effectively reach customers? What methods are most likely to attract their attention and influence their buying behavior? What is the role of the sales organization and how do sales drive value for your customers? Feedback from customers specific to these questions is just as important as the feedback they provide for products and services and often can lead to a reshaping of traditional approaches to marketing and sales.

### **Why Feedback Matters**

It's important to remember that if you aren't willing to listen to your customers, the internet provides a convenient outlet equipped with websites, blogs and social media that are willing to lend an ear. Chances are that you rely on product reviews when making your own purchases, so there's a good chance your customers will do the same. You can be assured that if you aren't listening, your competition is, making your organization reactive to a conversation they have shaped.

According to the Acquity Group's 2014 State of B2B Procurement study, 94 percent of business buyers perform online research before making a business purchase, up 22 percent from 2013.<sup>1</sup>

This increasing trend in favor of online research means more accessibility to online customer reviews, making it easier for you—or potential buyers—to discover your customers' opinion of your company. Whether those opinions are positive or negative may depend on the ability of your company to incorporate customer feedback in the design and messaging of your product or service.

### **Collecting Valuable Feedback...Efficiently**

With the aid of the internet, there are many available methods that companies use to collect customer-generated recommendations. While emails for online surveys continue to clutter our inboxes, a mere 10 percent of these surveys result in a response, and hopefully a response that is relevant and productive.<sup>2</sup>

Although online surveys are certainly convenient and accessible for companies, we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss more traditional outlets with our customers. Customer advisory boards, commonly referred to as "CABS", can allow a company to meet face-to-face with its customers, providing a more personal and reliable experience versus customer satisfaction surveys. Moreover, they function to build deeper, long-term, collaborative relationships between your company and the customer. Remember however, these are not selling opportunities. In these environments selling happens indirectly. Overt sales approaches in the context of a customer advisory board are a recipe for disaster and a sure way to turn off your customer.

With time being of the essence, it's also critical that meetings have a focused agenda and that members feel their time is valued. The first step to implementing good suggestions is to create a community where input is welcome. After all, what good is having an advisory panel if we don't implement suggestions?

### **Practicing What We Preach: Canon U.S.A.'s CREATE Advisory Panel**

Canon U.S.A.'s longtime corporate philosophy; *Kyosei* – a Japanese word that can be defined as “all people, regardless of race, religion or culture, harmoniously living and working together into the future” is woven into the fabric of the way we conduct business, seeking to enrich the lives of the people who use our technology, striving to make intuitive products so that employees can be more productive and effective.

This idea of living and working together also applies to the way Canon U.S.A. values the voice of the customer. CREATE –which stands for Canon Reach-Out Advisory Team– is Canon U.S.A.'s customer advisory panel. It is one of many such initiatives within the Canon Group targeting input from customers across many parts of our business. Connecting with the advisory team allows Canon to listen directly to the voice of the customer to understand their business and needs in order to be a better partner. In doing so, our customers become trusted advisors in the development of our business strategies and planning process.

Keeping with the *Kyosei* philosophy, when Canon sought to introduce the new imagePRESS C800 series color digital production presses in 2014, we partnered with our customers to collect feedback. CREATE members were shown the product and asked to provide immediate feedback, including suggestions in the areas of media handling, print sample creation and additional support for applications that would assist these customers in growing their respective businesses. The input provided through this group of customers was implemented in terms of product design as well as in the plans Canon ultimately implemented to drive marketing and sales activities.

### **Back to Basics**

We are living in the digital age where customers are well-informed, knowing more and expecting more, with information readily available at their fingertips. In 2015, businesses are expected to multitask. Companies must juggle sales with engaging, tweeting, posting, monitoring and, of course, listening.

As the use of the internet continues to grow and social media builds new webs to closely connect us, we can anticipate the digital age will continue to create well-informed consumers. While our companies make strides to develop corporate social media pages and establish a strong web presence, it's equally important to remember why we started multitasking and making these efforts in the first place—to keep a pulse on the wants and needs of the customer.

While the business landscape shifts toward increased web presence, customers are provided with less human interaction with the companies they conduct business with. Arguably, the companies that succeed will be the ones that make an effort to consciously anticipate the future needs of the consumer and create an experience that customers will value. While social media can be successful at establishing a web presence, companies should adapt to juggling another ball: finding a way to create deeper, more personal relationships with the customer. ■

### Citations

<sup>1</sup> 2014 State of B2B Procurement Study: 2014 STATE OF B2B PROCUREMENT STUDY: Uncovering the Shifting Landscape in B2B Commerce. Rep. New York: Acquity Group, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Dorrell, Adam. "Boost Your Net Promoter Survey Response to 60%+!" CustomerGauge.com. Customer Gauge, 16 Feb. 2013.