

SATISFACTION • Lay your defenses down

Prepare acct. managers for feedback meetings

By STEVEN W. LEWIS
and WILBUR L. PIKE

Your customer satisfaction survey is completed, individual account reports are in the hands of your account managers and the time has come to begin preparing for the meeting with the customer to discuss feedback on the survey. Ooh, this could be a nightmare.

Customer feedback meetings are not an option; they're absolutely necessary, regardless of the content of the survey results. The actual results of the feedback become secondary once the

SPECIAL REPORT

account manager has focused on what's really important in this meeting: using the survey results as a means to strengthen the relationship with the customer. Unfortunately, for most quota-oriented account managers, the skill set they need is sometimes foreign to what makes them successful salespeople.

The goal in these meetings is for the account manager to shift the focus from dwelling on the detailed results of the survey to finding approaches and techniques, supported by the survey results, to help strengthen the relationship with the customer. However, the distance from the hard data analysis of an effective customer satisfaction survey to the much softer target of using the data effectively with customers is difficult to traverse.

The first thing that makes sense for the account managers who now hold the survey results from key customers is to have time to read the data carefully and begin to make notes about the areas on which they wish to focus. Account managers need to concentrate first on identifying the strengths of their customer relationship.

Starting with the items that the customer tells us we are really good at and that they value highly is extremely valuable for account managers because these are the tools they can rely upon to be effective when they approach problem areas later on. The strengths are the attributes to maintain at high levels and try to develop further. Intellectually, the concept is easily embraced. But once the account managers have their reports, intellectual issues take a back door to emotional ones. Almost uniformly, high-performing account managers go immediately to the items from the feedback that they feel are negative or critical of their own performance.

That high performers want to concentrate on their less-than-perfect areas of performance is basic human nature. The natural tendency to want to get to the bad news first is the primary obstacle to overcome.

Ultimately, the account manager's goal is to prepare for a sincere, focused, consultative, non-confrontational dialogue with the customer—not dialogue designed to sell the product, find out if the contract is renewed or expand their product line. Instead, the conversation must be designed to explore the realities of the customer's perception of the relationship, both company-to-company and person-to-person.

The emotional content of the customer feedback meeting is exceptionally powerful and the account manager is often resistant, consciously or unconsciously, to hearing the real messages.

There are several reasons, from a psychological and adult-learning viewpoint, why the positive focus is so important to begin their preparation. Perhaps the most significant of those is the greatest obstacle to the candid and open dialogue that the survey results should stimulate: defensiveness.

High-performing, bright and energetic account managers find it nearly impossible to read their feedback from a customer and not react defensively. The spectrum of that defensiveness is wide, ranging from finger-pointing back inside their own organization to blaming the customer for not acknowledging all the effort the account manager has expended to cutting self-criticism that account managers subject themselves to.

Account managers should not try to prevent or deny their own defensive reactions, but to own them for what they are, explore them more fully if they feel the need to do so, and finally begin to manage them. Nothing will so certainly prevent the exploration of the customer's honest perceptions about performance than a defensive reaction from the account manager.

We use all sorts of subtle and not-so-subtle techniques to help account managers defuse their defensive reactions. Of course, when we ask them if they are feeling defensive, they usually say "no" or "not very much." We ask if the customer is right with every item they responded on. We can ask if any of them are reading critical responses about areas on

which the account manager has really focused recently and feels that significant progress has been made. Do they want to point out the progress to the customer in response to the feedback the customer has offered? That's defensiveness, pure and simple.

One of the techniques that has worked well is to talk about the defensiveness trigger words. Any sentence or verbal response that begins with "yeah, but" is guaranteed defensive. In fact, the word "but" all by itself should trigger warning flags. For example, in an opening statement about an area of concern that the customer has identified, the account manager might say, "I know that you are feeling that our billing process is too slow and inconsistent, *but* you have to admit that our performance has improved recently."

Placed in that sentence, the word "but" is called a negative qualifier. Its actual effect is to negate everything that precedes it (what the customer told us in the survey) and positions the second half of the sentence as the "real" truth (what the account manager thinks the customer should have said in the survey). A sentence constructed in that way forces the customer into a defensive stance. Once account managers accept the likelihood of their own defensiveness and see the obstacle it places with customers, they can manage it.

With the likelihood for defensiveness now manageable, account managers can review the data from their surveys more objectively. They can come closer to a real answer to the question, "What is my customer really telling me here?" As they narrow their focus and choose those items they most want to talk

about with the customer, they find their confidence increases. When they realize that they actually control the ultimate content, direction and tone of the feedback discussion, their initial concerns and defensiveness are reduced.

In addition to analyzing factual information from the survey, account managers can also look inside their own company for those larger corporate initiatives that may be pending or recently in place that address some of the concerns the customer may have identified. They may find that contacting other departments, such as billing or customer support, to discuss the customer's feedback may give them additional tools to bring to the survey feedback discussion. In addition, they have had an opportunity to share the customer information with those executives inside their own company for whom that information has an impact.

Preparing properly for the customer discussion is often far more than account managers expect as they begin the process, but the path of that development should be positive and progressive. The potential for strengthening a more solid relationship with the customer easily justifies the effort expended in planning for the discussion.

When account managers accept and plan for emotional items such as defensiveness, they have made an important transition away from the purely factual analysis of the survey results to the more effective approach for improving the relationship.

We are aware of instances in which feedback survey data is presented to account managers when the analysis of the data has been either incomplete or so detailed that the key issues get lost in the statistics. The most positive use of the feedback rests in merging the emotional with the factual. No one can read a report from the customer that details items that are powerfully positive, powerfully negative or distinctly in the middle without an emotional reaction. The key is to understand that emotional reaction and use the facts to either develop it further as a relationship strengthening tool, or manage it as one to be held in check or minimized.

Preparing for this meeting is vital to extracting the greatest value from effective survey data. The positive potential of merging the factual with the emotional makes the finished product a meeting, which becomes an undeniable asset in retaining satisfied customers. ■

Steven W. Lewis is a co-founder and partner of Development II Inc., a Woodbury, Conn.-based market research firm specializing in customer satisfaction surveys and relationship programs. Wilbur L. Pike is the owner of Focused Training Strategies, a training and consulting firm specializing in organizational psychology, effective interpersonal communications and managerial decision-making based in Litchfield, Conn.