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How to Win the Tug of War for Customers

By Deb Svoboda

Today's consumers are fickle. We've become the most demanding generation in history. As one executive at a large New York advertising agency explained, "We're like toddlers trapped in the terrible-two phase. We want, what we want, when we want it."

Every customer will jump ship if offered a better service package. That's why the tug-of-war for market share is a never-ending battle.

Customer satisfaction is a moving target. To compete in today's marketplace, in-plants must be prepared to not only meet, but exceed customer expectations. Since most competitors already offer the basic essentials, the focus must be on offering above and beyond what's expected.

So how do you do that on a shoestring budget? "In-plants must have a business-within-a-business philosophy when competing with their retail counterparts," says Carrie Griffin. As a former in-plant manager and founder of her own company, Peopleware in Horn Lake, MS, she helps businesses balance people and tasks. "In-plant managers too often get caught up in the day-to-day tasks of scheduling workflow and handling chargebacks. Customer service can easily become lost in the equation." She goes on to explain, "Technology has most managers scrambling to keep pace with the latest hardware and software. But to succeed, they must balance hardware and software issues

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Contributing Writers:
Deb Svoboda



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with peopleware, those concerns that deal with people such as customer satisfaction.”

Before Making Promises, Make Policies

Up-front communication is essential. It's important that customers know and understand the process requirements that will enable you to best serve their needs in the same way that commercial printers enforce policies governing job submittal, turnaround time, rush jobs, etc. It is critical to determine what is needed from the customer, as well as for the customer, and to develop clearly defined policies to ensure the ability to deliver value. The challenge for the corporate publisher is often to obtain support from upper management which is essential to the implementation of these policies. Production standards must be supported from the top and enforced throughout the organization in order to establish and maintain accountability.

If you know there's a problem going into the project, don't shy away from it. Trust is reinforced every time you successfully negotiate an issue. For example, it's the holiday season and one of your customers really wants a newsletter produced using red ink on green paper. Griffin stresses, "If you know something won't work, show the customer why and offer alternatives. Hand the customer back his decision-making power by allowing him to choose from among the alternatives.”

Flip on Your Sales Hat and Start Knocking on Doors

One-on-one communication, says Carrie Griffin, is probably the best selling tool possible.

To stay competitive, both large and small in-plants need someone, at least part-time, to be building awareness of the services and value provided. Your commercial counterparts have sales people pounding the streets, knocking on doors. You need to take every opportunity to reach out and be there too. For example, if you're contemplating buying a digital color copier, visit department heads and explain how it may suit their needs and get their input.



Carrie Griffin

You Can't Say Can't

It's important to build partnerships, not walls between you and your commercial counterparts. Use your competition to enhance your services. If a customer brings in a project that you can't accomplish, don't say, "We can't," even if you can't. That mentality often leads customers to perceive you as too limited in your capabilities.

Rethink your options. Customers don't care about the logistics of how a job gets done. They just want it done. Provide what

you can and manage what you can't by overseeing the outsourcing process. Become the funnel through which all work production flows.

Keep It Simple, But Keep It Coming

You think that you're providing the best all-around service possible. But do your customers? Customer satisfactions surveys are important survival tools. If you're going to be a customer service star, ask questions, seek out feedback and welcome complaints. Then chart those responses. You can't manage what you can't measure.

Griffin suggests surveying current and potential customers a minimum of once a year, preferably twice. Although some shops include a small survey with every job, the every time-rain or shine survey may lose its credibility over time.

She also recommends creating surveys that are simple and easy to fill out. "I personally prefer those that enable customers to circle or check the degree of satisfaction based on a one to five scale. Although more specific feedback could be retrieved from written comments, those formats demand more time from the customer.”

Researchers have found that Americans are besieged by an average of 250 surveys annually. They've become weary of being asked too much for too little. Interestingly, however, respondents who receive the results and are shown that

How Do You Stack Up?



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1205 West College Street
Liberty, MO 64068-3733
Phone: 816.781.1111
Fax: 816.781.2790
Email: ipmainfo@ipma.org
Web Site: www.ipma.org

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some action was taken to resolve negative issues were found to be twice as happy than before receiving the survey.

Bad News Can Be Good for Business

Steve Lewis, the co-founder of Development II Inc., in Woodbury, CT, is an expert at deciphering survey results. He warns managers to remain objective. Go through the returns and list the pros and cons. Then set the information aside for a few days so you can give the responses some thought.

Good news or bad...share the information with the rest of the team. Allow time for brainstorming. Positive comments can provide your staff with valuable reinforcement. "When identifying problem areas, avoid placing blame," stresses Griffin. "When a problem surfaces, groups look for someone to blame. Successful teams look for ways to improve performance."

Don't focus your energies on changing the survey rating or the customer's mind. Instead, identify how you can change your product or service.

Lewis says once you identify how to improve current service, it's time to provide feedback to your customers. This can be accomplished through a newsletter, letter or a personal presentation. Start by making an objective statement about your operation and its future goals. Never underestimate the value of this step.

Here's proof that your ears are tuned to the needs of your customers.

If issues can't be immediately resolved, be honest. Explain what steps will be taken to temporarily ease the problem until a better solution can be found. If you honestly can't identify a practical solution, ask for suggestions. Set deadlines for making any changes and above all, keep your promises.



Steve Lewis

Remember in the tug of war for market share, customer satisfaction can pull the deciding weight.

Deb Svoboda is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to Perspectives. She resides in Kansas City, MO.