

## When 'trust me' won't cut it

BY LIZ TORLÉE

### **Marketers must collaborate with customers to gain their loyalty**

Trust is an elusive thing these days and marketers are having a tough time figuring out how to get it. It used to be you put out a good product or service, you consistently delivered "high quality or your money back" and customers began to trust you. They might even become loyal. Then something happened: customer relationship management. It took a decade or two of nagging and countless employee motivation seminars for this concept to move into the mainstream and real progress has been made.

But, recently, another dimension of customer service is beginning to show and it risks throwing well-intentioned initiatives off track. Observing and listening to company stakeholders and consumers in many different fields (financial services, travel, technology, health care, to name a few), it's clear that relationships can go awry. Too often the literal interpretation of what a customer is saying is taken as definitive guidance. Here's an example: Many people juggling complex financial priorities claim they just want someone to take care of it all. So what happens? A seemingly logical response: Trust us. We'll take care of you; we'll figure it out for you. Expensive corporate campaigns are developed showing people being ushered into nice offices, dreaming about a better life and then, presto, actually getting one. The thing is, nobody believes it. They love seeing it, they even rate the advertising that captures it very highly. But if, for example, a guy is challenged by his friend about a financial decision made on his behalf, he is hard pressed to defend it. Suddenly, he is anxious again, tossing around on his pillow that night, fretting about hedge funds and the bond market and wondering what he is paying for. Why, when he so badly wanted to be taken care of, does he still feel vulnerable?

Because he has been rendered ignorant. A well-meaning customer relationship manager has taken away his critical thinking, his self-reliance and decision-making power.

Sitting in the waiting area of a car dealership's service area, you can see the same look of abject ignorance on the wary faces. Told that her brake pads have worn too thin, a woman whispers defiantly into her cellphone "Well, what am I supposed to do-make him show me? I wouldn't have any friggin' idea what I'm looking at." What's her problem? After all, someone's taking care of everything for her, just like she asked. But if the mechanic actually showed her the difference between a good brake pad and a dangerous one, if he told her how long she might still drive and gave her the option of returning, maybe she'd feel more in control, less vulnerable, more trusting. Instead, she is turned over to the customer service representative who, no doubt fresh from a coaching seminar, asks very politely for her money.

What we are being told in so many different categories is that marketers must learn to be collaborators, not providers. When it's done well, collaboration makes the process of decision-making not only easier, but also very satisfying. Across a whole range of product and service decisions, four important criteria for success are emerging:

**OBJECTIVITY:** This means taking a brave, neutral stance. It means pointing out the pros and the cons. It means helping people understand the whole category better instead of disguising hard-sell in the form of general information (which today's savvy consumer can smell a mile away). The new reliance on pharmacists for advice is a good example of consumers wanting to make informed decisions. Pharmacists don't tell customers what to do, they empower them, helping them to leave the store a little smarter than when they came in.

**OPTIONS AND ALTERNATIVES:** Long-term planning ain't what it used to be. Things are changing faster than ever, things go wrong. People need options and contingencies-not all laid out in a beautiful brochure but explained simply and pragmatically.

**STEP-BY-STEP GUIDANCE:** Home Depot's DIY workshops are a terrific example of this, opening up what are often considered complex and intimidating categories to a much wider group, giving people new skills. Some online travel services are appreciated for similar reasons. They put customers in the driver's seat. They show them the scenery, give them options, allow them to customize, take detours, evaluate alternatives, and eventually make their own educated and enjoyable decisions.

**FOLLOW-UP:** A common complaint from people today is that they are encouraged to trust, reassured about the importance of their call and then promptly forgotten. But follow-up will build trust only if it is used to collaborate with the customer, reinforcing their sense of control and the wisdom of their decisions-not when it attempts to sell another upgrade.

So what are people really saying when they claim they want to be taken care of? They want to get rid of the hassle, worry, uncertainty, forms, red tape, voice-jail, bureaucracy, unfathomable variations to wade through and pricing systems to decipher. Managing them into a relationship that removes their own sense of accomplishment is denying them the control and order that they desperately seek. Educating them, helping them understand the implications of certain decisions and then giving them easy ways to effect their new skills not only brings a sense of immediate satisfaction but builds a much stronger foundation for long-term trust.

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