

Being a Customer Interpreter

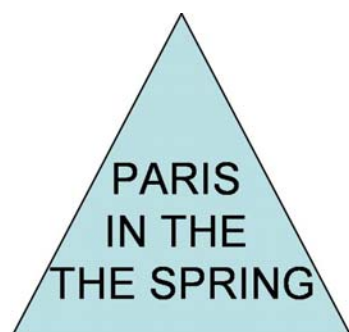
In a world where we can access more numbers about more customer events than ever before, are we getting any nearer to seeing the world through our customers' eyes? Or hearing our messages through their ears? Only by keeping our eyes, ears and minds wide open can we develop marketing and branding that will be seen and heard and welcomed by our current and future customers.

See it with your own eyes

Take a look at the photo on the right. What do you see? A tree? A hut? Shadow patterns?

Yet for the 8 year old girl who took the photo, this is a lovely tableau of a mother and baby hippo (can you see them now?).

The point is we see what we want to see. We see what's important to us. We see what confirms our view of the world.



What about the picture on the left? You might have come across it before in your childhood. Again it shows us (when you look carefully!) how our eyes collaborate with us to preserve our view of the world. (the the?)

And however rational we believe we are in the workplace, such judgments and filters are always in place. Our subconscious deletes up to 99% of what we see and hear. That deletion is based on what it believes to be relevant, what confirms our existing views, what seems to be important.

I was involved in a project recently to tell young adults about a new government scheme to encourage them to stay in education and build up more skills. The college that was involved had put information on the new grant in all their welcome packs. Leaflets were available around the college and posters were put up on the walls. Hundreds of application packs were handed out to students. Yet when we talked to a random sample - none of them had even heard of it. They were very interested once we'd talked to them face to face, but all the very sensible communication that had gone on till then had failed to get their attention.

So, we decided to try a new approach. We'd get the students to do the marketing for us by running a competition. The winning posters definitely had more "edge" than traditional government literature. They worked because they talked to the students in their own language, and with an authenticity that is hard to create as an outsider.

Sorry, I'm a little hard of hearing?

"I've phoned the bank three times now and they still haven't sent through the forms I asked for. Don't they LISTEN?"



"Yes I understand what you're saying; I just can't believe I'm hearing it. So the story is that because I, your customer, don't know how your company's internal filing system works, that makes it ok for you to sell me a product that doesn't work and then not replace it?"

Frustrating your customers probably allows short term cost savings - but it's no way to build a sustainable business. It doesn't have to be difficult for a business to know what its customers want. The customers know. Probably the front line staff know. The complaints department usually have some insights, as do the delivery drivers.

In the days before bar codes and computerised tills, I was involved with a pilot project selling pharmaceutical products through petrol stations. Every week I visited the stations, and they kept track for me of each item that was sold each day so we could analyse demand for the different product lines. That statistical data was useful - but so too was talking to the shop attendants. They weren't used to being involved and enjoyed the discussions. And they could tell me some very useful information about customer reactions - eg if they accepted a substitute (eg a different brand of pain killer) or just left empty handed. Listening to the shop staff gave me a richness of customer understanding that greatly enhanced my dry statistics.

If your business has a call centre, this can also be an excellent source of information. How about setting aside an hour with an independent facilitator to talk to a group of operators about what customers ask them? I guarantee you will find ideas for improvement

" They never understand this part of the application form"

"They don't understand why they can't send a certified copy of their documents instead of originals"

"They'd love it if we could offer to deliver their cheque book to their place of work instead of their home".

Often these observations are simple and cost effective to implement - and your staff will be motivated by being asked their views.

Speak my language

There is a scene in Westside Story (Sondheim's musical about rival gangs in New York) where the café owner is trying to talk some sense into his young customers bent on revenge and bloodshed. He uses the well worn line "When I was your age..." and gets the clear response "You were NEVER my age!"

So long as communication is designed from the company's point of view - and not the customers - there are always going to be jarring differences like the one mentioned. As with our café owner, they might be based on good intentions, they can be delivered with earnest integrity - but if they're in another language, the customer may never hear them.

In one job I've been involved in recently, there was great nervousness from the client about the term "dead-end jobs". Not polite. But when the target audience talk about their lives, those are exactly the words they use. And they respected and responded to the advertising that had the guts to tell it like it is. They didn't feel insulted by that - they knew where they were at. And they appreciated the fact that someone else had noticed and wanted to help.



Cracking the code

A lot of companies I know use major quantitative studies to improve their customer understanding. One is currently interviewing 30,000 users. The analysis may be available in a year's time. That might be alright if the world stood still - but those days are long gone. And what if the results

trigger new questions that haven't been covered in the original research? Too often I have seen expensive rigorous research consigned to the "I'll read that later" pile - it's too big, it's too hard to digest, it's not really answering the "what if..." questions faced by decision makers and, frankly, it can look pretty dull.

However, research like this could be structured to give managers the opportunity to have a conversation with the data. They might start with a surface view - ideally in a visual way.

"What's that lump over there? I'll zoom in on that"

"Hmm, this group of customers are dissatisfied with our service. Why?"

"I see. They want 24 hour telephone banking. But we already offer that! I wonder what type of customer they are?"

"Mostly 25-35, mostly male and working in big companies... so we could mail all our customers in that group, reminding them about our telephone banking service and offering help to register them."

And speaking of codes - it's important to understand when your customers don't mean exactly what they say. For instance, they'll nearly always say price is their key discriminator. But they don't fill their lives with the cheapest possible products - or Mercedes, Nike and Guinness wouldn't be the success they are. They may be saying price because they'd feel fools not to. Or because it's easy to think of. Or because they think it might encourage the company to reduce its prices.

Partner Your Customers



The buyers of a national chain of retail stores I worked with had a problem seeing the world through their customers' eyes.

As young, ambitious, stylish, single professionals, it was hard for them to identify with customers who were older, with children, probably not working, contented to run a nice home. So they kept sourcing the wrong products for the stores.

In the end the solution was simple - send representative customers along with the buyers when they went shopping. The buyers got to know the customers better, and understand what they liked and what interested them - and the customers got an exciting opportunity to directly influence what ended up in store. This was a very cost effective way of targeting products well - at a fraction of the cost or time delay of endless market research.

It also helped the buyers develop respect and appreciate that customers have their own lives, their own priorities, their own needs. They are not greater or lesser than ours. They have the right to be taken seriously and to have their views considered (where would we be without them?). That's why the media attacked the Chief Executive of Barclays Bank when as part of an investigation into credit card interest rates to the UK Government he commented.

'I do not borrow on credit cards. I have four young children. I give them advice not to pile up debts on their credit cards.'

Ask the question

I'm not a fan of questionnaires for market research - but thinking through the following may help you to understand where your business stands on some of the issues covered above:

1. Has your chief executive had a chat to more than three customers in the last six months?
2. Has all of your board chatted to a customer at least once in the last 12 months?
3. Do you ask your front line staff what they think of advertising material BEFORE it goes out?

4. Do you get letters from customers recommending improvements to your products and services?
5. Do you use mystery shoppers to test your quality?
6. Is there a safe and easy way for your staff to make suggestions?
7. Are there enough people involved in the decision making who truly represent your customer base?

Checking your score out of 7 on a year by year basis may be a useful vehicle to trigger steps in the right direction.

Summary

There are some key issues around customers for any business that wants to build sustainable competitive advantage

- Know who your customers are
- Listen to what they have to say (in a real conversation, not by handing out questionnaires)
- Learn their language and use it to tell them about your products
- Look at your products and services with a fresh eye, an outsiders eye and see where there is room for improvement
- Try the questionnaire on your business and see how you score

Hear what they have to say, see the world through their eyes, speak to them with respect and empathy - and I'm sure your customers will look after you.

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