

Give Customers What They Don't Expect

Raise the bar, instead of falling short of it.

By Anirudh Kulkarni - Posted Jan 1, 2009

What if Google went down for two hours tomorrow? Would site users remember its 99.99 percent uptime—or would they focus on how inconvenient the downtime was for that two-hour period?

Most likely the latter—a product of a customer environment where 24x7 uptime is the rule. Facing such oversized consumer expectations, many organizations have gravitated toward grandiose—yet flawed—CRM initiatives. *[For a look at how Google has penetrated the CRM world, see this month's cover story on page 22.]*

The CRM initiative's mandate is often narrowly focused on addressing customer expectations through large technology-driven change management projects. And while these initiatives play a critical role in advancing customer centricity, customer satisfaction often fails to match the resources expended on these efforts.

The Accenture 2007 Global Customer Satisfaction Survey bears this out: 75 percent of participating executives felt their customer service was moderately or extremely good, but 57 percent of consumers described themselves as upset or marginally to extremely dissatisfied with their experiences. The temptation is to close this gap by pouring more resources into understanding what these dissatisfied customers *do* expect—and then trying to exceed these expectations. However, there is a growing realization that small initiatives designed to deliver what customers *don't* expect can also have a significant impact.

On a recent Southwest Airlines flight, thunderstorms delayed our departure for three hours. While grounded, attendants took some obvious measures—free food and drinks, frequent updates, etc.—but hardly any that would exceed sky-high passenger expectations.

It was the airline's next move that offered a glimpse of how a small—but unexpected—gesture creates a positive and lasting imprint. Two days after the flight I received a personal letter from a Southwest vice president, apologizing for the delay and offering a free one-way ticket voucher to any Southwest destination.

For Southwest, the true cost of the gesture was relatively low. But the move created positive word of mouth and a potential revenue opportunity: Those who use the voucher still need to buy a one-way return ticket for that trip.

Small, unexpected customer service efforts can be valuable within the context of a broader CRM strategy. That said, identifying those initiatives—and executing them—requires a strategic organizational approach incorporating the following elements:

- **Voice-of-Customer approach**—To know which gestures would show your customers that you value them, you have to get inside their minds. What have they grown to expect? If a flight is delayed by multiple hours, what if the gate agent offered a same-day voucher to top frequent fliers?
- **Competitive analysis**—A commodity service (hotel rooms, office products) can still create memorable customer experiences, using small gestures as competitive differentiators. Most hotels catering to business travelers offer some version of the same bare-bones free breakfast, but a hotel chain upping the ante with a hot bar or gourmet coffee might be enough to secure the traveler's loyalty.
- **Internal organization maturity**—Some things that seem easy to do are hard to execute. Improperly deployed, the customer-facing gesture necessitates a series of unintended process changes that snowball beyond the ability to deliver them. Make sure you understand the organizational implications of any gesture (no matter how small). How would you roll it out? Would it inundate front-line service agents in a way that impacts broader service quality?
- **Keep it simple**—The gesture needn't be elaborate or complicated—just something unexpected that gets the customer talking about it with friends and colleagues.

The role of process and technology in improving customer service is indisputable. Organizations intent only on large-scale improvement initiatives, though, may neglect the small but impactful efforts that go beyond the expected. These gestures enhance customer satisfaction, improve customer loyalty, and attract new customers.

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