

In Pursuit of Delight
By Natalia Preiss, PhD
Manager, Applications Specialists, GE Healthcare
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Like any Service Manager, I collect, review and form strategies around Customer Satisfaction Scores and reward employees who receive high satisfaction scores. I implemented all the text book best practices, and lived in the unknowing bliss of high customer satisfaction scores. I literally went through the five stages of grief when the results were in from the first month's Net Promoter Survey. The percentage could not be right, look the satisfaction scores are still high?!! Who came up with this calculation anyway? Well, maybe the clients don't really understand the recommending part. Are you sure we can't just take the percentage of promoters? This is so demoralizing, what do I say to the team who has not been doing anything differently? I am going to be slaughtered in the next meeting and hopefully death will come quickly and suddenly.

Fortunately curiosity stepped in and I began to wonder why the significant difference. For the next year, I continued to collect responses both for the traditional customer satisfaction and the net promoter question. Several facts became clear. First, our business could see a direct correlation between net promoter scores and customer leads (inquiries for sales). No big surprise here – a happy customer will tell 1 or 2 of their colleagues, but an unhappy customer will decry the company to as much as seven people. The second fact was not a surprise either to the researchers Bruhn and Grund who, in 2000, said that customer referrals are only obtained through the highest level of satisfaction. I was now on a quest to discover what possible machinations had to be performed in order to delight a customer to the point that they would tell others about our work.

As I sifted through the surveys looking for a trend, it became obvious that individual styles of our service professionals were related to the highest scores. I needed to know what were they doing and how to stretch individual styles to accomplish the same results. I gathered up the usual satisfaction suspects – free services, exceeding expectations, friendliness, and created a 12 point survey to poll the team on their “go to” customer facing style. I then ran ANCOVA and T Test on their responses against the 900 client surveys, specifically looking for styles most used where the overall NPS was 70% and above.

The results supported a study by Beck and Smith in 2005 who stated that the customer's feelings had more to do with their readiness to refer others. In fact, even though free/ extra services were provided, the employee's style had a higher correlation to the promoter score. Employees who did not use these styles were consistently rated lower NPS scores throughout the 20 month period. The styles that were most recommendable were those incorporating humor, empathy, and setting/ re-setting of expectations. Being friendly did not help the cause (albeit would hurt detrimentally if the employee did not demonstrate professionalism). Now it seems not only do employees have to be friendly, but funny, and at the same time, empathetic.

Our colleagues who labor in the field of adult education, like Sharon Bowman and Doni Tamblin, can attest to the importance of humor when working with customers. People tend to be more accepting/ receptive when barriers are broken and fears are calmed. The most effective way that Adult educators have found to accomplish this is through humor, and through empathy that is founded by experience, not a customer service scripted message. Adults relate to each other through experience. They share experiences, compare experiences, and even rank each other by their experiences. So, it is not the customer service that is important to referrals but rather the experience that our customers have during that service that differentiates one from another. As leaders, our challenge is to shift employees away from focusing only on the act of service (getting the job done) to providing a memorable experience (their style when enacting the service).

It would be easy for us to list the clichés on how to accomplish this – hire the right people, reward employees based on their successes etc. etc. Yet, how does one teach an otherwise not very funny person to incorporate humor? Humor in itself can be subjective to style – it could be self deprecating, or sarcastic, or upbeat, or downright corny. Many managers will shy away from using it for fear of offending someone in the workplace yet it is a key component of a delightful experience.

If you have recently implemented the Net Promoter survey, or are thinking of implementing this approach as a company wide initiative, you should treat and prepare for it as though it is a culture shift within your organization. Part of preparing for this shift is communicating the strategy; why is your organization moving in this direction and what does a Net Promoter Score mean? Employees need to be prepared for the variance between satisfaction and promoter scores,

and must understand that promoters are customers who have been so delighted that they cannot help but to tell others. They need to realize that not only is the bar rising on their performance, but that the focus from service to experience is also shifting.

I believe that people intrinsically desire to do the right thing, and as leaders, we can facilitate and provide the tools that lead to the desired result. The first tool is the element of Style Awareness. I found it very useful to first help employees identify their own relational and personality styles through a DiSC profile and next to point out that regardless of dominant style, new behaviors can be incorporated. It no longer became acceptable to say “this is who I am.” Instead, as a team, we were saying “this is who we want to be to our customers.” Even more important to this transition was the accountability that team mates demonstrated to each other, knowing what their individual challenges were, and what they committed to incorporating as part of their new styles. Their choice to incorporate humor into their deliverables ranged from use of cartoons in presentations (with permission) to their funny “go to” stories and scenarios that they learned from each other.

As a team, we then began coaching each other to share experiences that relate to clients in order to develop our awareness of empathy (or lack thereof). I focus here on a team based approach since implementing net promoter surveys is not an individual effort. Very often in a challenging customer situation it is easy for us to tell ourselves a story about the client. We tend to say that they are being difficult because they are arrogant or ignorant, and worse, we begin to look for these behaviors throughout the engagement which in turn de-motivates us from wanting to stretch into more favorable behaviors. So knowledge and awareness truly became powerful in helping our service professionals understand how traditionally deemed “soft skills” were now critical to achieving the desired result: a delighted customer.

The team took a step back and looked at the deliverables, pinpointing where they typically saw clients struggle to use the products/ services. They looked at areas where expectations were frequently in conflict or being tested, and ensured that documentation existed for these areas and conversations regarding these aspects were held upfront with

the client. I personally found that if the customers were allowed to think about and prepare for multiple scenarios, they would tend to be more appreciative when the basic expectations were met, and furthermore delighted when the expectations were exceeded.

Flip back for a second to your mounting email and you probably have correspondence from many companies offering the latest news and best practices in your industry. The tools that we incorporated are not new concepts. Yet when combined, accountability and awareness, use of humor and camaraderie while grounding customer relationships in empathy and stated expectations are keys to creating experiences of which customers are willing to recommend. It takes at least 30 days to form new habits and establish new behaviors. What I know for certain is this – our Net Promoter Score for the first month we implemented in 2005 was 33%. Today, our average monthly score hovers at 75%.