

Meet Expectations Before Trying to Exceed Them

By trying to reduce costs, companies reduce the overall value they provide to customers and drop performance below customer expectations.

by [Lior Arussy](#)

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In the pursuit of delighting customers, companies are rushing to declare a new frontier: exceeding customer satisfaction. The problem is, companies are often so far removed from meeting even basic customer expectations that exceeding them is almost impossible. Throughout the years, multiple cost reductions and efficiency initiatives have caused companies to develop myriad processes that prevent simply meeting customer expectations. Companies making objectives to exceed expectations are often met with customers' skepticism, because they are still struggling to get basic service and support from those companies.

One of our clients had a procedure that only allowed customers to complain within 21 days after an event. After that time, the response customers got when trying to register their complaint was that it was simply too late. (Who knew that like milk, grievances expire after a short period of time?) The assumption by the company was that by eliminating all the "old" complaints they could save money and reduce costs at the call center.

Call centers are rife with such poor practices and procedures. Another bad practice is to assign a limited number of phone lines to the call center. This lowers the call volume and costs associated with it, but businesses end up paying anyway: More busy signals will frustrate more callers. Still another poor practice is minimizing the authority of employees to settle customer disputes. Ultimately, the customer is dragged through a maze of managers and supervisors to clear up a \$20 disputed invoice. Behaviors such as these have mushroomed over time, and now degrade customer experiences to the point of unprecedented lows.

The aspiration to exceed expectations is admirable, but customers will appreciate a much more attainable goal: meeting their expectations. Adding a little humanity and common sense to solving problems goes a long way to building loyalty. I understand that

exceeding expectations does sound inspirational and exciting as a corporate mantra, but in the spirit of listening to customers, we may want to start with just doing that. Don't heighten customer expectations only to not meet them--that's a more serious crime than not meeting lowered expectations.

Review your employee manual and operating procedures and ask yourself the following:

- Are these the procedures of a customer-centric company?
- Are they designed to protect and delight customers, or to protect and delight CEOs?
- Does it make sense to conduct business this way? Is it profitable?
- Are these procedures designed to address abusers or mainstream customers?

Answering these questions should allow you to identify opportunities to change processes and procedures, and to start designing the way you conduct business from the customers' perspective. If you believe that delighting customers is profitable for you, you will soon realize that the customer perspective is your perspective as well.

The first order of business in meeting customers' expectations is to identify those conflicting procedures and remove them. It is the first and crucial step to exceeding expectations. I know that meeting customer expectations doesn't sound as exciting as exceeding expectations, but it is real and it is possible.

Lior Arussy is the president of Strativity Group and the author of several books. His latest book is Passionate & Profitable: Why Customer Strategies Fail and 10 Steps to Do Them Right! (John Wiley & Sons, 2005).