

Living in your customers' world

Do you know if your customers are getting a great experience? Now there are systems that make it easy for customers to talk directly to you. Dr Ian Brooks explains.



While customers are increasingly outraged by their bad experiences, managers continue to over-rate their company's customer service. To make matters worse, managers with these delusions of adequacy fail to grasp what outraged customers are costing them.

You might remember the story about Dave Carroll who was flying United Airlines with his band Sons of Maxwell when a passenger sitting next to the window noticed the baggage handlers throwing guitars around. Carroll's guitar was one of them and he spent the next nine months unsuccessfully pursuing compensation for the damage to his expensive guitar. Eventually, United told him they were closing the incident and would not respond to any further emails. Carroll's response was to write a couple of songs about the experience which he posted on YouTube. The first song attracted more than six and a half million viewers and media frenzy ensued – following which United's market capitalization dropped \$180 million. Go to YouTube and listen to the songs. They are really funny. Then think about the damage they are still doing to United's brand.

It does not take much to turn a customer into a terrorist. I stayed at The Menzies Hotel in Sydney last week and enjoyed the experience until I offered to pay by American Express and was told there was a 1.5 percent surcharge. I said this was a very poor practice because after spending 24 hours trying to impress me, they ensured the very last experience I had would leave a bad taste in my mouth. The employee listened politely and then explained the reasons behind the policy. The policy might make sense to her but it did not to the Australian audiences I've told since.

I hope you are thinking how stupid both United Airlines and The Menzies Hotel were. To save a few dollars, they developed policies that antagonise customers who in today's world can easily damage the company's brand by broadcasting their bad experiences.

Of course, you would never let that

happen in your business because you understand business success comes from having profitable customers who are loyal and passionate advocates. I suspect the CEOs of United Airlines and The Menzies Hotel would agree with you. The problem is, they do not know what is happening at the customer-facing end of their organizations. They do not see the impact of their policies, processes and staff behaviour. Are you in the same position? Do you know if your customers are getting a great experience no matter which branch they visit, or who serves them, or what day of the week or time of day it is? You would if you lived in your customers' world and understood how they rated their customer experience, but to do that you would need a system that makes it easy for your customers to talk directly to you.

There are two types of customer feedback systems in New Zealand to help you.

The first is Tell Simon, which I have spent several years developing with Paul Linnell, a New Zealand-based specialist in turning customer feedback into improved performance. The Tell Simon system is very simple. Just tell your customers if they have a compliment, complaint, suggestion or question they should tell Simon (www.tellsimon.co.nz) and he will pass their feedback on to you. The system will provide you with a report showing how much feedback the organisation got, what proportion were compliments, complaints, suggestions or questions, and the key issues you need to address. Simon can also survey your customers to find out how well they think you responded to their feedback.

The second type of system is a text-based customer feedback system, primarily designed for B2C but also useful in B2B situations. I know of two in New Zealand. One, called CustomerRadar, was developed by Mat Wylie, an experienced Auckland market researcher. Typically, a company will use CustomerRadar in two-week blocks three or four times a year, although some

run it continuously. Customers are given a card offering them an incentive, and asking them to text their rating of their customer experience. They can also add comments. The exciting part of this system is a dashboard that allows managers to monitor the ratings almost in real time. They can see how their branch is doing compared to others in their group, how performance varies throughout the day and over the week. They are able to drill down and see customer comments to get an understanding of what is causing the ratings. A similar system, called Texusys, has been created by Adam Hutchison in Christchurch. With Texusys, the customer's feedback is available in real-time over a private website for the business to act on, and summary graphs show what percentage of the feedback was positive or negative. Both of these text-based systems have been shown to vastly increase customer feedback.

These systems mean there is no excuse for any of us not to have a window on our customers' world. Since I try to practice what I preach, I would like to hear your feedback about my columns in NZBusiness. Please go to Tell Simon if you have a compliment, complaint, suggestion or question and give me your feedback. Alternatively, use CustomerRadar by texting 'brooks', rating my articles on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is Poor, 2 Average, 3 Good, 4 Very Good and 5 Excellent and sending the text to 203. You can also add a comment after rating my articles.

I really want to hear from you because I know that you, my customers, will tell me everything I need to know to succeed. Yours might too!

Dr Ian Brooks (www.ianbrooks.com) is a leading expert in customer care and chairman of the NZ Association of Customer Excellence (www.nzace.co.nz).