



Customers as learners

The concept of customers as learners is a critical part of the process of creating superior customer value. Dr Ian Brooks explains.

Every now and then someone gets an idea that is so brilliant you think, "Gosh that idea is so simple, so true and so powerful!" Customers as learners is such an idea.

The concept was developed by Lab Wilson, who in his long career has been in clinical practice as a vet, and in the corporate world, a technical advisor, marketer, salesman, trainer and facilitator.

As you know, to succeed in business you need profitable customers who will stay with you a long time. The best way to do that is to make your customers successful. Lab's brilliant idea is that to make our customers successful, we need to see customers as learners and make sharing our knowledge about our products and services a key part of the buying process.

In his recently released book *Customers as Learners* (www.nahanni-publishing.com), Lab writes: "To get the most from your product or service, customers need to know how to use them. Most of your customers will not have the knowledge to fully achieve the success inherent in what you are providing and will need to learn more. You must be the provider of that learning." Lab then explains how treating customers as learners can increase customer value in three ways:

Firstly, an important source of customer value is in the product or service itself and that is why the manufacturers of products and providers of services work hard to build as much customer value into their offerings as they possibly can. "But what", Lab asks, "if customers do not know enough to be able to unlock the value a supplier has worked so hard to create?"

Very few of us, for example, got full value from our VCR because we did not know how to use all of its functions. How many

of the functions in your car, computer or music system go unused? Lab argues that if value has been built into a product or service but the customer does not know enough to access it, that value does not exist as far as the customer is concerned. Teaching the customer how to get the most from what they have bought thus increases customer value. What further value could your customers get from your products and services if only they knew how?

Lab also reminds us that customer value is created (or destroyed) by the customer experience and he explains how sharing your knowledge will improve the quality of that experience for your customers. Customers will get more value from the buying experience if they are not just 'sold to' but are also given the opportunity to learn information and acquire skills that increase their success. Conversely, one of the biggest causes of customer dissatisfaction and complaints is the inability to share knowledge. "Poor communication results in a lack of agreement about potential outcomes, failure to understand risks and unrealistic expectations. Ensuring your customers understand what it is you do or how to use your product successfully is essential." How many of your customer complaints come because your customers did not understand?

There is one more reason why you should help your customers learn. It will help you build a close and long-lasting relationship with them. Business is a social activity between human beings and that, as we all know, is why it is so important to build a relationship with your customers. The sales process is one opportunity to build a relationship with a customer particularly at the after-sales stage. Once the customer has bought, they will see anything you do

to help them learn how to get the most from their purchase as a sign of how much you are interested in them. This is what builds goodwill and strong relationships.

Of course, many professionals, highly-trained technicians and people selling sophisticated products do understand the importance of sharing their knowledge with their customers. But realising you can create more value for your customers by showing them how to use the product or service you are offering is not enough. You have to know how to teach. As any educator can tell you, there is far more to teaching someone than simply talking to them. In *Customers as Learners*, Lab explains why so many people with a great deal of expertise have difficulty sharing their knowledge. "Most experts have difficulty sharing their knowledge with anyone who is not at a similar level to them. Because of the knowledge gap between themselves and their customers, they find it difficult to connect."

Lab shows how to teach customers quickly and effectively. You will quickly see the advantages in understanding the steps to customer learning, the different learning styles and the keys to technical communication.

The concept of customers as learners is not a slick selling tool designed to con customers into buying. It is a critical part of the process of creating superior customer value. *Customers as Learners* is written by a man who understands that it's about the customer always, and who has spent a lifetime understanding how people learn.

Customers as Learners is such a simple, useful and, once it is explained to you, obvious idea that like me, you will wonder why you did not think of it yourself years ago. And isn't that true of all great ideas?

Dr Ian Brooks is a leading expert in customer care. Follow Ian's blog at www.drianbrooks.blogspot.com. He welcomes your feedback at www.tellsimon.co.nz.