The Psychology of Customer Satisfaction
by Naomi Karten, www.nkarten.com

Just Say Whoa and the Psychology of Customer Satisfaction

The Psychology of Customer Satisfaction

The Psychic-ology of Customer Satisfaction
Principles of Customer Satisfaction

1. The Likeability Lesson
   People tend to rate service higher when delivered by people they like than by people they don't like.

*** What does this principle mean for you? ***

Likability Tools

- Listening
- Friendliness
- Lightheartedness

Listening

Greeting Card

What people need... is a good listening to.
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Listening

Friendliness
Recognize the positive impact of a smile!

Smile for 10 seconds as you enter a room.

Test your skill at spotting the difference between a fake smile and a real smile

www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles
(or google “spot the fake smile”)

20 questions based on research by Professor Paul Ekman

Lightheartedness
Seek opportunities for levity, light-heartedness and laughter.

People who can laugh together can accomplish almost anything together.
But some things are funny!

Don’t rely on email for all your interactions with each other.

Lightheartedness

Rule Number 6

Principles for Psychic-ologists

1. The Likeability Lesson
   People tend to rate service higher when delivered by people they like than by people they don’t like.

“Don’t take yourself so goddamn seriously!”

Source: Benjamin and Rosamund Zander, The Art of Possibility, p. 79
Principles of Customer Satisfaction

2. The Importance Issue

Customers who are satisfied with aspects of service delivery that are important to them tend to be happier about other aspects that might otherwise trouble them.

and conversely

Customers who are dissatisfied with aspects of service delivery that are important to them tend to find fault with other aspects that they might otherwise ignore.

*** What does this principle mean for you? ***

When I’m the customer, what’s important to me is . . .

Two Types of Expectations

1. Product expectations

2. Process expectations

Product Expectations

The system, software, or solution:

- Functionality
- Reliability
- Timeliness
- Speed
- Accuracy
- Cost
Two Types of Expectations

**Process Expectations**
How people want to be treated:
- Listening
- Responsiveness
- Follow-up
- Trust
- Respect
- Friendliness

**Key Grievances**
1. Not being kept informed about matters of importance.
Key Grievances

1. Not being kept informed about matters of importance.
2. Being made to endure excessive wait time...
3. Dishonesty: having important information deliberately withheld or distorted.

Typical Customer #1

“If you can’t get the job done when you said you would, let me know before the time is up.”

Typical Customer #2

“I have confidence in their ability to do the work, but

NOT . . .

in their ability to communicate well while doing the work.”

During Times of Unusual Uncertainty

- They kept us informed.
- They had a specific schedule for keeping us informed.
- They kept us informed even when they had no new information to give them.
- They informed us of their plans to keep us informed.
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Key Pleasers
1. Friendliness
2. Being listened to
3. The 3 A’s
   - Attitude
   - Apologies
   - Appreciations

Grievances vs. Pleasers
Poor service upsets customers more than excellent service pleases them.

What the Research Shows
“While breaking a promise is bad, exceeding a promise is often not worth the effort.”
Source: Nicholas Epley, Ass’t Professor of Behavioral Science, University of Chicago Graduate School of Business

A Frequently Quoted Claim
A customer who has a positive experience will tell 3 other people.

BUT
A customer who has a negative experience will tell 11 other people.
A customer who has a positive experience will tell 4 other people.

**BUT**

A customer who has a negative experience will tell 10 other people.

---

A customer who has a positive experience will tell 5 other people.

**BUT**

A customer who has a negative experience will tell 13 other people.

---

A customer who has a positive experience will tell 5 other people.

**BUT**

A customer who has a negative experience will tell 13,000,000,000 other people.

---

The Real Risk of Negative Experiences

**The risk of embellishment**

When customers describe their negative experiences, what do they do?
The Real Risk of Negative Experiences

The risk of embellishment

To start with...
Believe it or not!
Then...
Boy-o-boy!

Principles for Psychic-ologists

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Principles of Customer Satisfaction

3. The Communication Caveat

Any two of us are two people separated by a common language.
Principles of Customer Satisfaction

3. The Communication Caveat
   Any two of us are two people separated by a common language.

*** What does this principle mean for you? ***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>British</th>
<th>American</th>
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You are unremarkable!

You are magnificent!!!

We want to be involved.

Attend meetings  Understand decisions

Be interviewed  Have calls returned

Assumptions You Should Always Make

Always assume that customers:

1. Interpret what you say differently from the way you do.
2. Mean something different from what you think they mean.

Dilbert

“How’s this for a start?”

“It might offend people named Theodore.”

“That’s a loaded word.”

“It’s overused, if you ask me.”

“This ain’t Shakespeare; let’s use words we all understand.”

Scott Adams. Building a Better Life by Stealing Office Supplies: Dogbert’s Big Book of Business, p.31
Principles for Psychic-ologists

3. The Communication Caveat
Any two of us are two people separated by a common language.

Principles of Customer Satisfaction

4. The Sameness Standard
In certain fundamental ways, we are all the same.
We all have hopes, dreams, fears, worries, etc., and we all wanted to be treated with respect.

*** What does this principle mean for you? ***

A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives, by Cordelia Fine

Sample chapter titles:
The Vain Brain
The Deluded Brain
The Pigheaded Brain
The Secretive Brain

What the Research Shows

“We give others less credit for their good intentions than we give ourselves for our own.”

Source: Cordelia Fine, A Mind of Its Own, p. 67
4. The Sameness Standard

In certain fundamental ways, we are all the same. We all have hopes, dreams, fears, worries, etc., and we all wanted to be treated with respect.

Principles for Psychic-ologists

1. The Likeability Lesson
2. The Importance Issue
3. The Communication Caveat
4. The Sameness Standard

What Do These Principles Mean for You?

Cartoons
by
Mark Tatro
www.rotategraphics.com
Additional Resources
Available at www.nkarten.com

1. Articles on customer satisfaction -- and much more
2. Perceptions & Realities newsletter
3. Books and eBooks
   • Communication Gaps and How to Close Them
   • Managing Expectations: Working With People Who Want More, Better, Faster, Sooner, NOW!
   • How to Establish Service Level Agreements
   • Changing How You Communicate During Change
   • How to Survive, Excel and Advance as an Introvert
   • 40 Frequent Feedback-Gathering Flaws and How to Fix Them


Thank you for joining me this evening.

Naomi 😊
Splish Splash, I Was Takin’ a Bath

When I checked into a hotel recently, I was delighted to find that my accommodations featured a jacuzzi bathtub. With its several nozzles for creating swirling water, this would be a real treat.

Over the jacuzzi timer was a sign that said, “Fill tub before setting.” Why, I wondered. As one possessed by a profound sense of “what if?” I turned the timer, curious to see what would happen. The answer: nothing. Odd, I thought, why would they post a meaningless instruction?

I filled the tub part way, covering all but two of the nozzles. I set the timer, noticing that once again nothing happened. Foolish sign, I thought, and settled into the soothingly hot water. Thus ensconced, I pushed the “jacuzzi on” button. Be aware, dear reader, that up till this moment, the rest of the bathroom was dry.

Suddenly, instead of the underwater swirling I was anticipating, water from the nozzles sprayed fiercely in all directions. Quickly, I pulled the shower curtain closed, but the projectile-like jets of water blew aside the shower curtain and drenched the entire bathroom. In the few moments it took me to turn the jacuzzi off, all the towels were soaked, along with my bathrobe, the floor, walls, ceiling, and a swath of carpet in my room.

Ah, I realized (too late, of course), the cryptic sign was intended to prevent just this sort of water-ific situation: Fill the tub, it was warning me, because if you don’t, the bathroom floor will become a training ground for ducklings. But given the sopping wet consequences of ignoring its advice, surely the sign would have been more effective if it had explained the “why” behind the warning: Instead of a lackadaisical “Fill tub before setting,” perhaps something like “To avoid damage or flooding, fill tub above nozzles before turning jacuzzi on.”

There’s a larger lesson here than mere jacuzzi-izing: Don’t assume that others will follow your instructions simply because you’ve provided them. If their failure to follow your instructions could have dire consequences, explain the reasons for those instructions. Or at least indicate that these are Really Important Instructions and they’d better pay attention. And if you haven’t explained the consequences of failing to follow the instructions, recognize that some people (myself, for example) will be inclined to test them, just out of curiosity.

Wetter but wiser, I wanted to confirm my revised interpretation of the sign. I filled the tub further, till the water covered the remaining nozzles, and with trepidation aforethought, I turned the jacuzzi on again. Sure enough, it behaved flawlessly, creating exactly the sort of underwater turbulence that a well-behaved jacuzzi should. After a pleasant soak, I bailed out the bathroom, returning it to its former state of unsogginess.

Happily, I found that the jacuzzi was a luxurious stress-reliever, even if the stress it relieved was caused by my attempt to use it in the first place.
The weather seems to have gotten colder as I’ve gotten older. As a result, the ski jacket that once kept me warm became too skimpy. Sensible people would simply stay indoors, but that lets me out. So I needed a jacket that would protect me when the thermometer suggested I should be indoors, relaxing by the fireplace.

Off I went to the ski shop. It took some searching, but to my delight, I found the Perfect Jacket. It was roomy enough to fit comfortably over the quadruple layers beneath. It was long enough to keep the nether regions from freezing. Its multitude of pockets would make me a self-sufficient storage system. It zipped up to my nose, ensuring protection from the wind.

And the color was striking. It was orange. Or rather ORANGE. I mean, it was bright! With this jacket, you could have seen me from a mile away on a moonless night. What a find this jacket was.

Until I got home, that is. I tried it on several times, and each time, one more thing annoyed me. Such as that it wasn’t just long, it was too long to ski in comfortably. The nose-high zipper would be great in stormy weather but a nuisance on clear sunny days. The jacket was big and roomy and heavily-pocketed, which was good, but with the belt cinched, I looked like a blimp with a belt. And that was bad. When short people wear big, bulky things, they look like big, bulky, short people.

And then there was the color. Iridescent neon orange. My husband pointed out that it would attract dirt. He, being a dirt magnet, would naturally think of this. I knew he was right, and despite my best efforts, it would soon be not just ORANGE, but filthy ORANGE.

I began to have unpleasant images. I can ski advanced terrain unless it has strategically situated trees that remind me how much I value my head. But just because I can ski it doesn’t mean I remain vertical the entire time. By the 17th time I tried on the jacket, I could hear the sounds of skiers shouting, “Look, there goes a short, dirty, orange, belted blimp — and a clumsy one at that.”

The jacket had to go back. This 24-hour trial period made that clear. But it did something more. It helped me clarify my requirements. I thought I knew what I wanted in a ski jacket, but I was wrong. I’d missed several key features that I wanted the jacket to have, such as a color that wouldn’t result in signs saying, “This way to dirty skier.”

And I had failed to realize the importance of other features. Until I saw a concrete example of my specifications, I didn’t really understand what I wanted.

Similarly, sometimes your customers don’t initially know what they want even when they’re positive that they do. What my ski jacket experience helped me appreciate is that specifications are really nothing more than a starting point, a first approximation. Sometimes, customers need, in effect, to try on the solution, simulating its intended use so as to see if it satisfactorily addresses their requirements and to make adjustments if any are needed.

I returned my jacket, and after a bout of trying on, I found another jacket, a beautiful, dirt-concealing blue jacket. It lacked several features I’d previously wanted, but I loved it. If I’d evaluated this jacket based on my original requirements, I’d have rejected it. I have now worn this jacket for many a ski season, and I still love it.

I learned from this experience that in the abstract, it’s impossible to know which requirements really matter, and of those that do, which are more important than which others. You might want to keep this experience in mind as you help your customers define and refine their own requirements for your products and services. You can help them avoid signs that say, “This way to confused customer.”
LISTENING

Carrot-Chomping and Milkshake Slurping!

It’s easy to give the impression that you’re not listening even when you are. I discovered this in one of my seminars when Terry, a participant, made a key point, and I started riffling through my material to find a quote that reinforced the point. Afterwards, in an evaluation form, I found the comment that when I was flipping through my material while Terry was talking, it looked like I wasn’t listening.

Oh, but I was listening, ” I thought, quickly rising to my own defense. I’d heard everything Terry said. But it didn’t matter. I had given someone the impression that I wasn’t listening, and if one person had that reaction, others may have as well.

I’m now more conscientious about how I look when I’m listening. I think of this aspect of listening — the impression you convey that you are listening — as persuasive listening. So what about you? Do you listen persuasively? Because if your customers perceive that you’re not listening, they may react accordingly.

For example, they might shut down, withholding the very information you need to help them. Or, conversely, they might raise their voice to the deadly decibel level in an attempt to get your attention. As trivial as the appearance of non-listening might seem, it can undermine your ability to successfully assess needs, solve problems, and build strong relationships with your customers — and with all others with whom you interact.

Still, we all have preferred styles of listening. Some people look at the ceiling when they’re listening. Others hear better by turning their head so their ear is closer to the speaker. Sometimes, people can concentrate best if they close their eyes (though snoring may signify a more advanced level of concentration). Many people can listen attentively while carrying out 47 other tasks. But how do these listening styles affect those who are speaking? Most people are unaware of their listening style and its possible negative impact on the person who is speaking.

Might your customers ever feel discouraged, annoyed or resentful when they’re speaking to you? If so, try to become a more persuasive listener. Make eye contact. Occasionally play back what you’ve heard. Ask clarifying questions. If you need to take notes to retain what you’re hearing, first explain why you’re doing so, and ask if it’s OK. The other person will invariably say yes.

Most important, stop whatever else you’re doing and pay attention.

Use all these listening tips in moderation; intense, prolonged eye contact can be even more annoying than none at all. And since many of these signs of listening vary from one country to another and one culture to another, learn about the variations if you travel elsewhere or interact with people from other cultures, so as not to cause offense.

More important than exhibiting just the right level of eye contact or verbal responsiveness is simply appreciating the serious impact that apparent non-listening can have. If a good relationship with your customers and others is important to you, make it your responsibility to ensure that those you speak to see you as attentive and fully focused on what they’re saying. Simply stop, look and...
Someday people mumble when they speak. OK, so be it. And some people speak too quickly. So be that too. But why is it that so many people mumble and speak too quickly when leaving a phone message? Especially when they want you to return their call.

Take, for example, a message I recently received. The caller wanted to order my SLA handbook and asked that I call him back. But I couldn’t decipher his name, even after listening to the message several times. It was as if he began saying his last name while midway through his first name. Somehow, he succeeded in squeezing both names into a single syllable!

Not having his name wouldn’t have been a problem, though, if I understood his phone number. But I didn’t. He said it too quickly. All I knew for sure is that it had a lot of 3’s. I did, however, understand the name of the university he said he was calling from.

What to do? What to do? Aha, I thought. I’ll go to the university website, find an employee directory, and search it for phone numbers with lots of 3’s. But the website didn’t provide a directory. So I followed the links to some of the departments this fellow may have been in, seeking phone numbers with lots of 3’s and people whose first and last name, when merged, might sound like this fellow’s. But no luck.

I had no choice but to do nothing, probably leading him to think I don’t return phone calls.

But the saga continues. About a week later, he called again and once again left a message asking me to call him so he could place an order. His name hadn’t changed — still an efficient single syllable. But this time, I understood his phone number. I called. No answer. I tried several more times over the next few days. Still no answer.

I went back to the website, in search of I knew not what, and this time I noticed an email address I could contact for information. I sent a message saying I was trying to reply to a message from someone whose name I didn’t know, but whose phone number was as follows. I asked if it would be possible to determine whose phone number it was and if so, could I please have his name and email address.

The next day I received a reply giving me both. Amazingly, both his first and last names were familiar names, yet neither was recognizable in his transformation of them into that singular syllable. And as to his phone number, this message explained that phone numbers at the university had changed and he should have given me his new number.

I called him. I found him. He placed an order. Happy ending.

But why do people make it so hard for themselves and, in the process, those they’re trying to connect with? The reason, I think, is that most people just don’t realize how their messages sound. So a few suggestions:

When you leave a phone message, speak slowly. Enunciate. Say your name clearly, and spell at least your last name. State your phone number as though the person you’re calling isn’t as smart as you are and can’t hear as well as you do. State it so that the person can jot it down without having to replay the message 47 times. Oh, and give the correct phone number.

One other suggestion: Record yourself leaving a typical message that you might leave for someone you wanted to hear from. Listen to it and adjust accordingly. Have someone else listen to it and give you feedback. Adjust accordingly.

I look forward to hearing from you. If I’m out, leave a message. Clearly. Please.
MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

No Cheese, Please

In conjunction with a keynote presentation I gave recently, my client generously arranged a room for me on the concierge level of the hotel where the conference was being held.

At 9:30 the evening before my talk, as I was mentally preparing to speak in a ballroom large enough to hold several small cities, I heard a knock at the door.


Earlier in the evening, wine and cheese would have been delightful. I might even have enjoyed it at 9:30 if I didn’t have a speaking engagement the next morning. But at this hour, and given my need to concentrate, I found the interruption distracting and intrusive. Fortunately, after two rounds of No Thanks, the fellow went away.

Not 30 seconds later, the phone rang. “We have an amenity, courtesy of the hotel,” said Mr. Persistent, who must have been paid based on the number of guests he annoyed while delivering his amenities. “And it won’t cost you a thing.” Great — I wouldn’t be charged for a gift I didn’t want. My answer remained the same, if you don’t count the increase in decibels, “NOOOO THANKS!!”

Perhaps this sort of attention was customary on the concierge level of this hotel, and perhaps it had never occurred to the management of the hotel that anyone would turn down their gracious offer. That would have been enough of an issue to justify an article in this newsletter. But . . .

The next day, when I returned to my room to prepare to leave, I found a note from the hotel general manager that said, in part (the comments in brackets are mine):

“I trust that we met or exceeded your every expectation [Well, no, actually you didn’t.] and that your stay with us was an enjoyable one. If we did indeed satisfy you, I would be pleased to hear from you through our guest comment card, which is available at the front desk in the lobby. [Enabling you to advertise that 100% of all comment cards report satisfied customers?]

“While our team members are trained and motivated to extend every courtesy and service [except the courtesy of going away when not wanted], I do recognize that occasionally we fail. If, for any reason, we have not succeeded in this regard, I would appreciate it if you would take a brief moment to let me know. I have set up a private voice mailbox for this purpose, which can be reached simply by dialing extension “1192” from your guest room telephone. I have found this type of immediate feedback to be extremely helpful, and I do hope you will use it.”

This approach to feedback gathering struck me as an intriguing way to elicit complaints from customers who might otherwise just go away angry. It was a clever way to ensure that grievances reached someone in a position to rectify the situation. I called extension 1192 and left a detailed, amenity-specific description of my complaint. I assumed the general manager would immediately call me back. When he didn’t, I assumed he’d contact me shortly afterwards. Wrong! I never heard back. I have no idea if he received my complaint, listened to it, cared about it, or made any adjustments based on it.

In terms of building customer loyalty, soliciting evidence of dissatisfaction and then not following up with the dissatisfied customer is worse than not requesting the feedback at all. This hotel will not be my first choice next time I’m in that city. But if circumstances dictate that I must stay there, I’ll ask to stay on a cheese-free floor.
The Perception of Urgency

My lunch-mate and I were seated quickly. Time passed, yet no one came to take our order. I'm not exactly the most patient person in the world, and normally, I'd have been mumbling and grumbling. But on this occasion, I was willing to wait my turn.

Why? Because I couldn't help but notice that the waitresses were dashing about breathlessly. They never just sauntered. They never moseyed. They never even dillydallied. They hustled and bustled, racing from table to table, into the kitchen, out of the kitchen, yet somehow managing never to spill a drink or drop a tray.

Finally, a waitress came to our table. She apologized for the lengthy delay, and explained that two waitresses had called in sick, so the remaining three were doing the work of five people. She took our order, apologized again, and promised she’d bring our lunch as quickly as she could.

Now, an ultra-cynical sort might contend that these waitresses only appeared to be functioning at top speed. “Maybe,” this Cynical Sort might claim, “they rushed around while in sight of customers, but once in the kitchen, they twiddled their thumbs, sipped wine, cracked jokes, sauntered, moseyed, and dillydallied — and then darted out of the kitchen with breathlessness aforethought.” I doubted it, though. These women didn’t look like the tarrying type. They were doing the best they could under trying circumstances.

But they were also doing something else. They were reinforcing the positive impact of the perception of urgency. There’s something about seeing people really giving it their all that makes delays easier to tolerate. So the question arises: How can you communicate urgency to your own customers if your job doesn’t lend itself to scurrying from table to table heaving a tray of lunch munchies?

Actually, it’s easier than you might think, because communicating urgency is not about setting the speed dial to high. Rather, it’s about interacting with customers in a way that says you’re truly listening to them. It’s about conveying an attitude that says you take their needs seriously. It’s about letting them know, through what you say and do, that you haven’t flung their problems into the Black Hole.

How do you do this? By keeping customers informed about the status of matters that are important to them. By giving them vital information about outages, delays, malfunctions and crucial changes before they have to ask. By letting them know what they can reasonably expect from you when — and also by letting them know sooner rather than later if the “what” or “when” has changed.

Your words, tone of voice, and behavior can make a difference in whether customers believe you’re treating their needs with urgency — or with an apathetic, indifferent, go-away-I-have-better-things-to-do attitude. What, when and how you communicate can generate customer satisfaction even when multiple demands, competing priorities, or insufficient resources prevent you from doing all you’d like to.

Alternatively, you could fill a tray with BLTs, hoist the tray on high, and dash breathlessly to and fro.
People repeatedly spell my name wrong. I say it (Karten) and spell it (K-A-R . . .), and they write it C-A-R . . . Maybe they’re thinking milk carton or juice carton or egg carton. But even when I spell it without saying it first, they sometimes still write it with a C. As if it’s not bad enough having a first name that’s often misspelled. All you Naomis out there know what I’m talking about.

So it makes me feel less alone when I hear from people who’ve had similar experiences being misspelled. You wouldn’t believe some of the names people have. It’s no wonder a name gets mangled when it looks like an anagram for the entire alphabet. But that doesn’t make it any less frustrating when you’re the one whose name is misspelled. And what really gets me is when people spell my name wrong even when it’s right in front of them in writing.

The exact same thing happens with my address. I say Woodland Parkway and spell it slowly, and people, being in a dream state I guess, write it as Woodlawn Parkway. But the level of accuracy isn’t much better when my address is right in front of them large enough to see clearly even if their magnifying glass is broken. They still write it as Woodlawn Parkway.

This wouldn’t be a big deal, but believe it or not, a half-mile north of here is Woodlawn Road. And a half-mile south, right near the town line, is Woodlawn Street. You can understand why I get nervous when someone tells me the check is in the mail. Fortunately, the people at the post office are pretty swift; they see to it that bills reach me without going astray. And they provide guaranteed junk mail delivery, no matter what the address.

But I’ve become picky about what mail I read and how I judge what I read. If it’s mail with a label generated from a mailing list, I don’t hold the sender responsible for misspellings. That is, I forgive the sender, then toss it out without reading it. (I divide my trash into two groups, correct and misspelled.) But if it’s a personal letter, and my name or address is misspelled, my reaction is that it’s from someone who doesn’t care about accuracy. If the mailing is from a vendor who’s trying to sell me some-thing, the company automatically loses the sale because I figure that sloppiness about a customer’s name may spill over to the vendor’s product or service.

This may seem to be much ado over a few vowels and consonants, but I venture to guess that most of your customers have names, and that they too like their names spelled correctly. It’s a minor thing, such a very small part of being service-oriented. It’s something people don’t think about when you do it right, but do it wrong and they’ll notice. So ask your customers how they spell their name and address and listen carefully to what they tell you. Don’t assume you’ll get it right without asking. Mr. Smythe hates to be listed as Mr. Smith. And if you’re a vendor, be extra careful. There are already enough ways to lose the sale.

Having said all this, I confess that I still goof now and then myself, and it’s no more forgivable when I misspell you than when you misspell me. So if I’ve misspelled your name, feel free to send me a scathing letter. I deserve it. Just remember that the post office is under strict orders to deliver scathing letters to the nearest related street within a half-mile of here.
Perceptions & Realities

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Be Calculating

If you’re a service provider, customer expectations can pose a major challenge. That’s because expectations are wondrous creatures: They grow, they shrink, they change shape, they change direction. They shift constantly, and they shift easily. And just because you know what they are today doesn’t mean you necessarily know what they’ll be tomorrow. Yet, how satisfied — or dissatisfied — your customers are is determined by these expectations and how well you succeed in meeting them.

Let me count the ways
If expressed as a calculation, customer satisfaction might look something like this formula:

\[
\text{Customer Satisfaction} = \frac{\text{Your Performance}}{\text{Customer Expectations}}
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Of course, the situation is not quite this simple. Customer satisfaction is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, such as past experience, changing priorities, management demands, communication preferences, provider competency, the urgency of the need, and whether the toast got burned this morning.

An additional factor revolves around the psychology of dissatisfaction: When customers become dissatisfied with a service attribute that’s particularly important to them, they are likely to also become dissatisfied with aspects of the service that might otherwise remain below their anger threshold. For example, when cancelled flights and delayed departures lead to increases in passenger complaints, passengers also complain more about the piddly packages of peanuts — even when peanut packaging has remained unchanged. And when people spend eons on hold waiting for someone who can help them, they tend to be less satisfied with the service they ultimately receive — even when it’s service they might otherwise be pleased with. As customers, we may be willing to let the little things slide, but disappoint us about the big things, and our satisfaction level is likely to plummet.

Given all these factors, customer satisfaction is hardly as straightforward as plugging numbers into the numerator and denominator and calculating the result. In fact, this formula isn’t about numbers at all; it’s about the relationship between performance and expectations and how these two factors intertwine so as to influence customer satisfaction.

In particular, this formula serves as a reminder that no matter how satisfied your customers may be, their satisfaction level can be affected by changes in either their expectations or your performance. That means you have to pay attention to both. If their expectations change so as to exceed your performance, then their level of satisfaction is likely to decrease. And if your performance falls short of their expectations, you can reasonably expect their satisfaction level to drop.

How they see what you see
And that’s where things can get tricky, because how you perceive your performance may differ from how your customers perceive it. In fact, discrepancies between your perceptions and theirs occur more often than you might think; I routinely encounter such discrepancies when I interview both service personnel and their customers. Strikingly often, service personnel think they’re doing a great job, while their customers think otherwise. So, even if you’re working yourself to the proverbial bone, if customers view you as unresponsive, then you are unresponsive — in their eyes.

The reverse is also true: If you really are unresponsive, but customers perceive that you deliver superior service, then you do — in their eyes — and you gain little by trying to convince them otherwise. I’m not advocating bumbleheaded service, of course, but merely emphasizing that customer satisfaction is driven by their perceptions, not yours. Their perceptions are their reality, and any overlap between their view of the world and your own may simply be one of those delightful coincidences.

Watch for changes
What all this means is that you have to pay attention. If your customers’ satisfaction level is changing, find out what has happened to affect their expectations or perceptions. Whether that change in satisfaction level is skyward or in the direction of the bottomless pit, analyze what’s happening. If satisfaction is rising, find out what they perceive you as doing well, so you can continue to do it; if satisfaction is slithering downward, figure out how to reverse the situation before that satisfaction level falls off the chart.

Make sure you don’t get so wrapped up in delivering services that you lose sight of your customers’ expectations and how well they think you’re meeting them. Be conscientious in observing what’s going on in your customers’ environment and your own that could affect their satisfaction level.

Just a caution from the We Can Always Dream Department: If you’re among the mathematically inclined, don’t make the mistake of concluding from the above formula that if customer expectations decline to zero, customer satisfaction will rise to infinity. Math works that way, but customers don’t. Sigh . . .
Yakkety-yak

You can’t learn about your customers’ needs if you do all the talking. Talk too much and you risk alienating the very customers you hope to please.

My doctor exhibited this syndrome when I asked whether Condition A was related to Condition B. As if I’d just pressed the “Chatterbox On” button, she proceeded to describe all medical research conducted on both conditions since Hippocrates was a lad. I was impressed with her knowledge, but not once did she ask the reason for my question. She not only didn’t have a clue; she was so busy reciting medical history that she didn’t realize she didn’t have a clue.

The upshot, when she finally reached modern times, was that there was no known connection between the two conditions. And given that fact, I didn’t really care about all the rest.

The refrigerator repairman we called in was afflicted with the same condition. This guy was gushing with enthusiasm and eager for me to know as much as he knew. Sadly, developing refrigerator expertise has never been one of my life’s goals. All I wanted to know was, Will this refrigerator ever keep my ice cream cold again? The answer turned out to be no. Case closed.

And then there are computer techies. When I had a fellow help me configure some new computer equipment, he talked non-stop. This fellow knew all (judging from the word count, at least) and was eager to share every bit of it with me. He didn’t even seem to need to breathe; he simply spewed forth. Squeezing in a question was no trivial matter.

These people were eager to share their knowledge. But if you want to generate customer satisfaction and build long-term relationships, you have to determine how much information is the right amount for the customer, and then respect that limit. Asking a pertinent question or two — and then listening carefully to the response — can help immensely in determining how best to communicate with the customer. In fact, showing an interest by asking questions is an amazingly simple way to exhibit interest in the customer.

For myself as customer, here’s what would have worked better with these three talkaholics:

Before educating me in medical history, my doctor might have asked me why I wanted to know about the connection between conditions A and B. By understanding what I was trying to find out, she could have targeted her response to fit my question. Or she might have simply said, “There’s no known relationship. Why do you ask?” Then if I wanted more information (or a decade of data), I could have said so.

The refrigerator repairman might have asked if I wanted to know what he was doing as he dissected our ailing refrigerator. That would have given me the option to encourage or suppress his chattiness. Determining a customer’s communication preference can be crucial in generating repeat business. But this guy, well-meaning though he was, got on my nerves. Hopefully, our new refrigerator will provide 20 years of ice cream-friendly performance.

And the computer techie might have periodically asked any of several questions, such as, Is there anything you want me to explain? Am I giving you the amount of detail you want? And (my favorite), Do you have any questions?

Good customer service requires more than competence at doing the job. It also requires understanding how your customers want to be treated. That’s why sometimes it pays to stop yakkety yakking and listen.
I work with organizations that want to improve customer satisfaction and with groups that want to work together more amicably. My services include seminars, presentations, consulting, and coaching. I have given seminars and presentations to more than 100,000 people in the US, Canada, and Europe, as well as Japan and Hong Kong. I’ve published several books, handbooks and guides, and more than 300 articles. Readers have described my newsletter, PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES, as lively, informative and a breath of fresh air. Prior to forming my business in 1984, I earned a B.A. and an M.A. in psychology and gained extensive corporate experience in technical and management positions.

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PLEASE . . .
get in touch to discuss how I can help you, or just to say hi. I’d enjoy hearing from you.

Naomi Karten