



SkillSharpener Web Extra

The importance of building trust with customers

A lack of trust could be costing your company money at every point in the sales, service, and repurchase cycle, says Jill Griffin, author of *Customer Loyalty and Taming the Search-and-Switch Customer*. A more positive customer service experience can help stem those losses.

"A lack of trust or a healthy level of trust can impede or help at every step in the cycle of contacts a customer has with your company," Griffin says. "If there is a lot of trust, then the performance of the product and your service performance continues to feed that cycle, and customers will come back again and again. But if there is a lack of trust, then customer interactions become more difficult and expensive at every contact point."

A lack of trust also makes the customer service or call center rep's job more difficult as well — whether they are trying to build awareness and coax someone into making that first-time purchase or when that post-sale call comes in and the customer has questions or is having difficulties with the product. "Trust can create an undercurrent that affects every customer interaction and ultimately colors the customer experience," Griffin says.

And the more trust a customer has in your company and its people, she says, the more likely they are to buy your products and services and send more referrals your way.

Identifying the triggers of trust and mistrust

To enhance customer trust and confidence, Griffin recommends working closely with frontline reps in a multi-step process. This involves identifying each point in the customer lifecycle, and developing new approaches and new language that focus on building trust.

It all starts, Griffin says, with pulling out a blank sheet of paper and charting the customer life cycle.

Take your reps through the life cycle or the order management cycle — when they contemplate buying, when they call in an inquiry or request pricing, when they get a sales pitch, when they place an order, when they call for shipping information, when they receive their product, when they call in with issues or problems. "You want to make this as concrete a discussion as you can, for strategy-building purposes and for teaching the front lines," Griffin says.

In fact, she says, "what I sometimes do with clients is ask service reps to identify the words that customers use at each step if that interaction has gone well — and if it hasn't gone quite so well. Ask reps, 'What phrases do you commonly hear from customers at each of these points? And what emotions do they signify?'"

Then, "once you have gotten it all charted out, the next thing is to say, 'Okay, what happened to trigger that negative emotion — or trigger that distrust?'" Griffin says. "Or on a positive level, 'What happened to trigger that positive response or trust?'"

Next, Griffin says, "start thinking about your systems and processes and what needs to change to eliminate the negative feelings — or what needs to stay exactly the same to make those positive feelings happen again."



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The important thing, Griffin says, “is to drill down to the emotions of the customer — because we are having a conversation here about trust, and at the end of the day, trust is an emotion. We are working to identify the triggers.”

Putting a trust team together

If you are really serious about building trust with customers, Griffin says, try putting together a cross-functional group of reps and other employees to map out the customer life-cycle stages and what is going on at each stage.

It’s important to get other departments involved, Griffin says, “because there are a lot of things in the customer development cycle that customer service reps have no control over at all. There are other parties and other departments contributing to those outcomes who need to be held accountable as well.”

Once you’ve put a team together and you have begun to identify your trust hot spots with some certainty, then you can put the team to work making improvements.

To develop ideas for improvements, Griffin suggests asking the following questions:

- Where are our best trust-building opportunities?
- How can we capitalize on them?
- What are our biggest threats to building and maintaining trust?
- What safeguards can be implemented to protect against potential loss of trust?

“I would be less inclined to seek a trust metric and look more at things like customers’ likelihood to repurchase.”

- For lost customers, what specific actions can immediately be taken to start the process of rebuilding trust?

According to Griffin, “Going through this exercise and asking these questions is likely to uncover a host of trust-building opportunities that already exist for your company and are simply waiting to be tapped.”

Can you create a trust metric?

“I think that companies get themselves into trouble when they have too many different metrics,” says Griffin, “so I would be less inclined to seek a trust metric and I would look more at things like customers’ likelihood to repurchase and their likelihood to recommend your company’s products and services.”

These are questions that can easily be added to a customer survey, and are good trust indicators. A simple question like this can work: “Do you anticipate buying more from us than you have bought in the past, buying about the same, or buying less from us?” Griffin says: “If someone says they are going to buy more from us, or about the same, that would certainly indicate a greater level of trust than someone who says they are going to buy less. A willingness to provide referrals would indicate the same thing.”

She adds: “Remember that you are trying to grow trust so that you can grow your business. Trust itself is not going to pay the bills.”

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