



AM I EFFECTIVELY SERVING MY CUSTOMERS?

What do I know about my employees' needs?

AM I RESPONSIVE, INSIGHTFUL AND ENGAGING WITH MY PARTNERS?

Are my suppliers and vendors satisfied?

Who is your customer?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In sales, everything is about building relationships with the customer. But what if we transform everyone our organization deals with – employees, suppliers, vendors, partners, etc. – into customers? How we talk and the language we use affects outcomes, and framing everyone our enterprise deals with as a customer creates a mentality of service that builds loyalty, value and trust.

It seems odd, but many organizations and companies have a hard time knowing who their customer is. You would think this is a simple question to answer – who is your customer? The challenge is that too many organizations take a narrow perspective when defining a customer.

The dictionary definition of a customer is “a person or organization that buys goods or services from a store or business.” But customer also has a second meaning – “a person or thing of a specified kind that one has to deal with.” Most companies look at customers as the former, rather than the latter. This is simply because they are putting more impetus on those who are “paying.” Whether donors, consumers or businesses, anyone who pays the bills is a “customer.”

But what about all of the other customers you have? Are employees customers? Are suppliers customers? Are vendors customers? What about partners? In short, yes – these are all your customers.

Why? Because you are serving them in some way. You have to engage with them on one or multiple levels. Even though they might not be your direct source of revenue, they do impact your brand, reputation and downstream profitability.

‘Noncustomer’ customers

Consider employees.

They are one of your highest operating costs. How much do you know about your employees’ needs? How can you identify if you are effectively serving those needs? Many organizations conduct employee satisfaction surveys, but just like customer satisfaction surveys, they look backward, identifying issues and trends after they occurred. In addition, they only examine a high-level view. It’s good to know that 86 percent of your employees are highly satisfied, but what does that mean? Why are they satisfied? There’s no way to adjust or enhance that number without knowing the levers that create that satisfaction.

Or consider suppliers.

While they provide components and services to support your end deliverable, how are you building relationships and engaging with them? Are they simply a deliverable to your organization, or are you examining how you can work together more effectively to increase their satisfaction?

Or what about vendors?

Are you serving them with the same mentality, responsiveness and performance that you expect from them? Vendors aren’t simply subservient to your company – they have similar pressures and demands from their entire customer base. We all know who our best customers are – and why they are so fantastic to work with. Take a page from your best customers and be a “best customer” for your vendor, as you will get superior service and opportunities in return.

Or even partners?

Your business relationships, while often financially driven, also come down to people and how those people engage with each other. Are you responsive, insightful and engaging with your partners or simply cashing checks? Are you looking for ways to build and better the relationship and in turn identifying new ideas to expand and improve the partnership? How can you address their needs as a customer-partner by working to create new value and business opportunity? Everyone wants a partner that looks out for them, and a business partner is no different.

Customers instead of stakeholders

There’s a big difference when we start talking about the people, organizations and partners we engage with as customers. Inherently, when we think of customers we think of service. We think of focusing on satisfaction, support, consistent communication and engagement. When we perceive and act as though everyone who touches the company is a customer, it changes the basis for how we behave.

Instead of solely focusing on things like profitable growth for “stakeholders,” we start to think about broader ways to serve that audience.

The essence of taking a customer viewpoint is about creating a broader perspective on how to serve that audience. Many organizations are striving to create a more innovative organization that is centered on identifying and acting on new ideas and ways to differentiate. When we utilize narrow language to think about our audience segments, including “employee,” “partner,” “stakeholder,” “vendor” and “supplier,” we naturally stereotype what these audiences are seeking and their role within the organization. When you think of the word “vendor,” people default to someone in a subservient role, solely there to serve the organization in a predefined capacity. However, with this stereotypical view, we lose sight of the opportunity to engage with vendors on a whole new level.

Too many organizations take a narrow perspective when defining a customer.

Consider the opportunity for a vendor to help solve a business problem with a new product or service, or even a new way to package and deliver materials to reduce costs or simplify processes. Vendors are often considered a one-way street, where they simply fulfill orders and requests, rather than groups of people who could collaborate with you to help solve a business problem. By shifting our terminology, we start shifting our mentality.

Shifting to a customer-centric mentality requires an organization to start looking outward rather than inward, focusing on relationships and strategic engagements to effectively compete instead of the quarterly bottom line. This shift requires the integration of an organizational “customer mission” – a clear statement that outlines to the organization how it will engage with customers. All customers. Designed to complement a traditional mission statement, it provides the framework for organizational behavior, providing



a tangible structure for translating your organizational values into action.

The impact of language

There are many theories and processes regarding organizational culture change, and many say that they begin with leadership.

Yet fundamentally, they begin with language. According to “How the Language We Speak Affects the Way We Think” from *Psychology Today*, how we talk and the words we communicate with affect the way we think. Language is a fundamental element in emotion that shapes both emotions and perceptions.

Our words carry enormous weight. Within the words we speak is an emotional potency. Each word that we use can have a colossal impact. A word from a manager or boss may, at first glance, seem inconsequential. But never think of words as inconsequential. Instead, think of them as powerful. Words can build up or tear down. They can motivate or discourage.

Words influence others and build relationships at work. They can tear down relationships. Simply put, language holds massive, colossal power to manifest change, whether it's good or bad. So when an organization

utilizes different words to identify different audiences served, it has a dramatic impact on behaviors.

By framing all people who touch the organization as customers, it creates a mentality of service, building loyalty, value and trust.

Consider how this perception and behavior affects organizational silos. If the product development team views the marketing department as a customer and vice versa, this begins to transform behavior. More communication begins to occur. Instead of requests getting sent, more questions get asked. A better understanding of how to “serve” that customer begins. The simple change of referring to departments as customers has a ripple effect throughout the organization and alters culture on a massive scale, much more than an individual leader could. By shaping the organization's words, you fundamentally shape behavior.

Most importantly, the change in terminology positively changes interaction and engagement. A customer service mentality places everyone in the organization in a service role. It enables organizations to look at the needs and challenges of their “customer” rather than their own. It helps them identify ways to achieve goals collectively rather than indepen-

dently. It encourages communication over assumptions and is the catalyst for changing the way the organization engages everyone who touches it.

The way we talk about work is just as important as how we work, and every message has an implicit and maybe even unintended message. By reframing organizational language around the customer, we start changing the way we think about our roles and, in turn, change how we engage with others.

If sales can open doors, everyone else can too

In any business, building relationships opens doors. We push and laud this mentality heavily within the sales department, but do we expand this level of engagement to other areas of the organization? What opportunities could be uncovered when we create a service mentality and behavior toward all of the “customers” an organization serves?

From discovering new business and growth opportunities to new product ideas to an employee with a breakthrough talent, we should engage with every person and organization that touches our business like a customer — like our best customer. Because a little bit of service can go a long way. ❖

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