

COLUMNS

Successful marketing programs give customers a voice

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Voice of the Customer (VoC) programs are radically redefining marketers' relationships with customers. They have been beneficial in changing many concepts, including the customer experience and the overall strategic approach that marketers use for problem solving in customer-facing channels.

But with any program, you have to weigh the pros and cons for your brand. Here are some of the benefits of instituting a VoC program, as well as some of the pitfalls to avoid.

Benefits

Culture and mindset

The customer is always right, but that is quickly forgotten when you work at the home office, so far removed from the customer that he or she is just a number on paper. It is easy to take advantage of customers and squeeze every dollar from them when you are not interacting with them directly.

Perhaps the largest benefit to creating a VoC program is that it often changes how marketers think about the customer, no matter where those marketers are stationed.

When marketers can see first-hand the feedback that customers provide, whether that is qualitative or quantitative, it is a great barometer for keeping retailers well rounded and customer-centric in their approaches.

Those results also provide ammunition and incentive to evangelize customer-centric ideas throughout the rest of the organization, and they can be especially convincing for leadership, which often has different priorities and vision for the overall brand.

It helps the customer-facing strategies and content to be mutually beneficial, which also helps the brand long-term.

Roadmap for strategic pain points

How many times have you been in a meeting when two or more people adamantly disagreed on which direction to move forward with a customer-facing initiative? Probably every meeting.

The problem with customer-facing programs is that sometimes there simply is not a right or a wrong answer. It is often based on context and how each person views the problem from his or her background and specialty. But customers do not view those issues from a marketer's perspective they are neutral.

So, what better way to understand the effectiveness of a program than to ask the customer?

The customer does not have an ego or an agenda, and in the end, it is all to increase his or her engagement and loyalty to the brand. Asking the customer often helps solve pain points without relying on intuition or guesswork.

Program foundation

As VoC programs become accepted within the brand, marketers begin to rely on them over time for answers and guidance prior to beginning new projects. Those results often indicate how to move forward or where to begin an initiative.

Over time, VoC results become the foundation that most marketing programs will build upon to increase success.

Again, it is mutually beneficial. Marketers have higher success rates and customers build better relationships with the brand. Combine VoC with some strong analytics, customer relationship marketing and customer experience teams, and you will quickly build a stalwart as one of the best brands in the industry.

Challenges

Faulty foundation

As with all analytics and surveys, they are subject to the human instituting them. That means there is always the potential for human error. Convolved wording, awkward questions, surveys longer than novels and a host of other issues can come into play.

The best approach is to keep things simple. Boil the questions down to the most basic elements that you would like to know.

Bias

The biggest factor that leads to a bad foundation is bias. It is extremely difficult to keep opinion from filtering into customer-facing questions, but it is imperative to build a strong VoC program that is trusted throughout the brand.

Sometimes programs built upon a strong basis of VoC fail, but nobody ever truly knows why, because it was the very first step they took towards building the program.

The answer, again, is to keep things as simple as possible.

The fewer the words and the more basic the format, the better chance of an accurate read.

The other option is also to use failsafe questions, which are placed in the same survey with the same intent, but formatted differently to confirm important answers.

Guidance, not edicts

One area in which many marketers get into trouble is that they often take results as orders. But if there is one thing of which we can be certain, it is that both customers and brands will always try to take advantage of each other if given the opportunity.

So, just because a customer wants something does not make it the most viable product, if it is a net negative for the brand.

The best option is to use VoC programs to build background and to find a middle ground of mutual benefit to keep the customer engaged and happy, while also keeping the brand's profits maximized. VoC programs help define those parameters.

Double-edged sword

As with any program, there are positives and potential negatives to VoC.

Keep it simple, build background to work from, and use the results as guidance, and not commandments.

YOUR BRAND will quickly see benefits from the departments that look to your program for insights to help benefit their customer interactions. That is a win-win.

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