

Innovation in the Customer Experience Drives Loyalty



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How can companies strengthen the effectiveness of employee interactions with customers?

SF: Everyone associated with your brand, including business and channel partners, needs to understand the importance of his or her interactions with customers. At Dow Corning, we've worked hard to understand how to create customer value, and our corporate culture appreciates that our customers' success is our success. Using the voice of the customer gives us an 'outside-in' perspective on what customers value. Finally, we communicate customer successes throughout the company by sharing stories from the field to build confidence and understanding in our team.

DS: There has been a lot of research on what drives customer satisfaction. First, customers like to be assured their views are being heard. Employees must be able to understand the customer's perspective and display empathy. The employee also must be given the power to satisfy the customer's needs. Even employees whom the customer may never see play an important role. They need to feel the same urgency for dealing with the customer's needs as do those who are face-to-face with the customer.

How do you ensure that all interactions with a customer are consistent with the corporate brand promise?

SF: First and foremost, you have to understand that you can't "failsafe" this, and that overcontrolling customer interactions can be detrimental. A good place to start is by defining the attributes and drivers associated with your brand. It's important to analyze all touch-points, or instances where customers have an experience with your employees, products, business partners, or communications/advertisements, to make sure you're providing customers with experiences that match their exact needs. And most importantly, employees have to be engaged and committed, because they are the strongest

In this dialogue, Scott Fuson, vice president and chief marketing officer, Dow Corning Corporation and Don Sexton, professor of business, Columbia University and founder/president of The Arrow Group, Ltd.[®], discuss the challenges and rewards of meeting customer needs exactly.

advocates of delivering the brand promise. We make it clear to our employees that everyone is "customer-facing" – therefore internal understanding of our brand is essential to delivering the brand promise.

DS: The key to brand consistency is communication throughout the company. Everyone must know what the corporate brand stands for and why it's vital to success. To many customers, employees are the brand. I've worked with power generation companies, for example, and found that the brand was determined in customers' minds largely by how the people in the field – the "wires and poles" people – related to them. The contact points with customers probably shape your brand more than any other form of communications. But for your employees to support the brand, they need to be provided with reasons why it's important. Your corporate brand may be the most valuable asset your company has. It summarizes, in your customer's mind, what you stand for, and my research shows it directly affects your revenue, profits, cash flow, and shareholder value.

How do you know if the experience you offer customers matches what each of them needs and wants?

SF: The answer is to listen! You need to listen not only to what customers tell you in interactions and on surveys but also to the questions they're asking you. Customers are more loyal and willing to pay more if you're capable of offering them robust, flexible options that meet their needs exactly. This requires employees who assess customer needs to be quick and nimble – and prepared to offer recommendations based on experience and expertise.

DS: Managers must be in constant contact with customers. The most infamous disasters in marketing, such as the Edsel automobile, the Tigershark fighter, and Polavision instant home movies, all suffered from the same problem – lack of understanding of customers' needs. There are many ways to find out how your customers view you. The simplest is just to ask them. Sales people have firsthand knowledge of what customers are thinking, which is very

useful information. Of course you can use surveys, and, as a marketing professor, I can help you analyze those results with all sorts of powerful statistical techniques. But as a manager, I usually prefer to hear from a few customers face-to-face. You especially want to talk to two kinds of customers: (1) your most demanding customers – they keep you tough and (2) the ones who left you – it is absolutely crucial that you find out why. While it's nice when customers say good things, their complaints are even more valuable because they help you improve.

How do relationships between customers and suppliers change when a products company also offers solutions/expertise?

SF: Offering solutions to customers requires a much deeper relationship, one that's based on trust and confidence. Customers must believe that you are truly interested in their needs. At Dow Corning, we encourage our sales staff to listen to what the customer is trying to do and offer appropriate options. It also helps to get a bigger picture by talking with others inside and outside of our customers' companies to gain a better understanding and perspective of the macro issues they face.

DS: If you are selling products in an arms-length transaction, customer satisfaction will often depend on performance of the products. However, once you become a partner with your customers in finding solutions to their problems, all the human dimensions of a relationship will affect their satisfaction levels. That means the listening, the understanding, and the ability to solve the right problem in an effective way all become part of your offering. Preparing employees to work with customers must include training both in technical skills and in people skills.

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