

CRM'S FAMOUS FIVE

Rob Brickle of Bsquared counts out the top five things to do to make your business more customer aligned.



Rob Brickle: paying a little attention goes a long way to improving a customer's perception of you

I thought this month I would take a slight departure from the norm.

There is no question that having a customer relationship strategy is imperative in this day and age. When we were in an industrial economy, it was vital to be the best in your particular service delivery or product line. Huge efforts went into making sure this happened and being the best ensured sales.

Over time, however, the level of performance of organisations generally improved to the point where sometimes it became hard to differentiate one supplier from another. This was where management of the customer relationship became key, and sometimes the only thing that differentiated one supplier from another.

Now, of course, we are referred to as being in the knowledge economy. This is where information as an asset has come into its own and where CRM technology has had an extremely important part to play, both in helping collect the data about a customer and, through the use of analytics, transforming that data into information – information that has become a key backbone to decision-making activity.

This is important in helping to understand the customer and maybe some of their behaviours. It has to be used intelligently, though, and combined with feedback and market data in an holistic way to drive change and improve competitiveness.

We all talk about this area and the fact that we need to be more 'customer-aligned' or 'customer-focused'.

Customer feedback

Bsquared are in a position through our work to constantly hear customer feedback about the little – and big – things that their suppliers could do to improve their relationship and become more of a partner. Some of these you might argue are obvious – but if they are that obvious, why is it that so many organisations aren't doing them?!

If we were to build a league table of the most common issues, these would be our top five. And you'd be surprised how paying a little attention to these issues often goes a long way to improving a customer's perception of you!

1. Give your customers a single point of contact.

It may sound obvious, but do your customers have one single focal point of contact for their relationship with your organisation? If, actually, it's two or maybe three or four, then you have a problem.

And if you often hear the words, "I can never get hold of anyone" or, "I don't know exactly who to talk to", you are also in trouble. You are making life difficult for the customer and they'll get fed up before long. So gather your team, focus the customer's engagement with you and tell your customer who the point of contact is – now!

2. Make sure the contact is someone close to the customer and their product or service.

Again, it might sound obvious but be sure the point of contact you agree on isn't someone who is only vaguely familiar with the customer relationship, is away or uncontactable for long periods. The person you choose needs to be knowledgeable of the account, understand the customer history and business, and be easily accessible.

3. Build a process for listening to your customers, share and regularly act on the feedback you receive.

Customers who don't feel heard or listened to, don't feel valued. Worse than that, they don't stay customers for very long. Put a mechanism in place that enables you to receive feedback from them and you'll get a vital insight into how you can improve

what you do to keep them happy.

Listen to the feedback, share it with your team, act on it and then feed back to the customer what you are doing and why. They'll feel valued and included in the whole process.

Then commit to an ongoing communications plan for your customers; share information with them by phone or email, meet them for lunch, whatever suits. Before long you'll become a genuinely trusted supplier.

Make sure, however, that you understand what kind of intervention you need to gather that feedback and be absolutely clear about how you are going to manage it. A great customer survey full of pictures and graphs that's sat on the shelf gathering dust, does nothing to improve the relationship.

4. Change the culture of your company so that the customer's needs are at the forefront of your staff's minds.

People are often so intent on getting a task done, completing this procedure, to this deadline, that they are often distracted from their customer.

Turn this on its head. Get your customer-facing teams together in an interactive, workshop-style environment and work on changing their mental focus to the customer's needs. Together look at why you behave in a certain way, and how you might change to become more externally focused.

Re-focus people on what the business needs them to do to keep happy customers. Look at creative ways to keep the customers' needs in mind – for example, a shared new vision statement or a new set of team objectives, to name but two.

5. Redesign your customer-facing processes so they deliver what your customer needs.

Within your organisation, examine your current business processes. Perhaps there are old, inefficient ways of working that are habit rather than helpful to the customer? Redesign them so they are more lean and efficient, and always have the customer's end goal as the objective.

Customers miss the agility and responsiveness they get with small suppliers. Look at how you can bring that feeling back. The single point of contact will help foster intimacy and responsiveness. Always be friendly, helpful and don't involve customers with internal problems or politics. They just want what they want, when they want it, and it's your job to deliver that seamlessly!

Change is a good thing. Ask yourself the question: "What can I do differently tomorrow?"

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