

THE METHOD IS THE MESSAGE

You can't claim to want get close to your customers then send them off to fill in an internet survey, says Rob Brickle.



Rob Brickle: if I'm making big decisions I would expect more of a dialogue

Assessing the relationship you have with your customers, do you ever stop and think about how that relationship is portrayed?

I was talking recently to one of the principals of our strategic partners in the US – Eric Engwall of EG Insight – and discovered that he had penned some thoughts on that particular subject. Personally I thought they were worth reproducing here so read on...

Just for a moment, imagine this scenario: a husband and wife are celebrating their 15th wedding anniversary with a romantic dinner at their favourite Italian restaurant. During the meal, the man says to his wife: "I hope you know how important our relationship is to me. I sometimes wonder if I'm doing all that I can to be a good partner for you. I'd really like to know what it is that you appreciate about me and also what I can do to improve.

"To help me better understand that, would you please go to this website and fill out a survey about our relationship? Your responses can be anonymous, and they will be consolidated with other women's input about their husbands. Then, based on the report I receive, I'll see what improvements I can try to make."

As preposterous as that scene may be, it's not all that different from what some companies do with their customers. Many organisations have adopted the common refrain that, "We need to get closer to our customers", or that they want to become more customer-centric. Some even talk of developing 'intimate' relationships with their best customers.

In an attempt to guide their efforts and measure their progress toward those goals, many of those same organisations have implemented some form of a structured feedback process. That's entirely understandable and appropriate – just as the husband's desire to get input from his wife was commendable.

The disconnect comes when companies choose a method of listening to their customers that doesn't accurately reflect their stated intent. An emailed request to respond to an automated, internet-based and perhaps anonymous survey can hardly be seen as an invitation to develop a closer relationship with a key supplier. The method just doesn't quite match the message.

I personally have nothing against surveys. In fact, I often respond to them when asked to do so by the coffee shop I just visited or the rental car company whose vehicle I recently used. I'm not put off by the request, but then I'm not desiring a closer, more 'intimate' relationship with those service providers either.

They want to know my perceptions of their products and services, and I'm willing to invest a few minutes of my time to provide it in the hopes that they'll keep doing the things I value and improve where I think they ought.

Now, if I was considered to be a critical or strategic customer to an organisation, my attitude about being surveyed and the probability that I'd respond to such a request might be different.

If I'm making big decisions that impact my own company and the supplier's, I would expect more of a dialogue – a personal connection – with someone from that organisation. I would want the sense that my supplier understood my organisation and its needs at a deeper level, and would want to know that my voice was heard and that my opinions and requests were considered.

To some degree, the level of effort a supplier puts into listening to its customers defines the difference between having a business relationship and just executing transactions.

As an individual traveller I don't really expect, or even want, a relationship with my rental car company. However, if I'm making travel purchases for an entire enterprise with thousands of mobile employees, I'd appreciate a more in-depth and personable approach to capturing my perceptions and preferences.

When evaluating your current customer feedback process or reviewing the options for a new one, I suggest that you consider the message you want to send to the most important contacts within your most important customers.

Our clients routinely hear from their customers that an active and personal yet structured approach to gathering feedback distinguishes them from competitors and sends a strong signal about the commitment to listen and respond to customer needs. The method is indeed the message.

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