



Customer feedback — particularly complaints — often slip through the cracks. The solution might just lie in the intelligent and intuitive use of technology

A CORPORATE DOSSIER SPECIAL SERIES ON CUSTOMER RESPONSIVENESS

Up With Technology

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LAST TIME I had spoken about how companies needed to harness the might of technology to get more intimate with their users and in the process become more Customer Responsive.

Technology has become the most revolutionary asset for transforming the relationship between organisations and their customers, and enhancing the overall experience of buyers. Its active use to improve the interface between the two is a must today.

I remember an occasion when my family went to watch a movie in a well known multiplex. The film was popular and had been drawing packed houses. Unfortunately, it had been hacked mercilessly to fit into a time frame of two-and-a half hours, so that an extra show could be accommodated during the day.

The staccato pace of the movie and the obvious poor editing caused major consternation among my folks. My wife immediately logged on to the multiplex web site and unleashed, what I can only assume, was an awesome tirade against the management and the unfair trade practices indulged by the owners.

While I indulgently berated her for wasting time, she was convinced she had done the right thing. Imagine my surprise and her smug satisfaction, when she promptly received a phone call from the CEO of the company, who apologised for what had happened and assured her that action would be taken against the distributor of the film. The next day, my wife was rewarded for her diligence and her faith in the power of the customer, with a courier that contained four free tickets for another box office hit. Needless to say, I was truly impressed.

Another time, a colleague mentioned how he had sent a letter of complaint about his favourite car (a top-of-the-line, popular model from a leading vehicle maker), in which the CPU had failed well past standard warranty time. Concerned about the technical collapse of such a vital part, he immediately shot off an e-mail to the dealer in Delhi with a cc to the CEO of the company in Chennai. Within the next couple of hours, not only did he receive a response from the CEO's office (which incidentally, appeared to be a personalised response, rather than a standard 'yes, we will look into this' type of letter), he was also besieged by calls from the dealer who virtually begged to pick up the car and fix the fault immediately.

Clearly, companies are using technology, particularly the internet, to elicit feedback from customers. They also use technology to draw up more detailed and close-up profiles of their clients, their usage patterns, attitudes, preferences, behaviour, requirements and their expectations. By capturing customer responses through online surveys, queries and complaint letters and deploying technologies such as data warehousing, companies are intelligently understanding their customers and anticipating their future needs.

Last year at a seminar organised by Avaya GlobalConnect, under the umbrella of the CEO Forum for Customer Responsiveness, a panel of business leaders from various industry verticals discussed the role of technology in building the customer-vendor equation. The panellists were unanimous in their belief that technology did indeed help to open up fresh avenues and channels of interactivity between organisations and their user community.

The speakers agreed that technology had emerged as a great enabler for companies, helping them to reach their customers "just-in-time." Whether it was to inform them about the latest products and services, or provide support over cyber space, technology was serving as a bridge between the vendors and buyers. Some vendors said that technology had given them the capability to manage their relationships with overseas clients, especially in the task of product management. They could give their premier users access to what was being done at the project management level, so that they had an idea of the costs involved and the status of their projects.

The discussion also indicated that at their end, buyers too were using technology to gain an insight into markets, competing products and services and the prices they were available at. Therefore, travellers were scouting the internet for the best airline deals before approaching their old time travel agents to actually do the job. Aware of what was available and armed with the bargaining chip of "knowledge," buyers were actually able to procure the services at the prices they were comfortable with.

Therefore, each time I hear someone say that technology is dehumanising the whole business process and creating a distance between customers and vendors, I tend to spark off a vociferous debate on the issue. It's time companies came to terms with the reality, it isn't the technology, it's how companies transform the way they provide service by leveraging the technology that is important and ran the following checklist for themselves:

Are you using technology? Make your offer - cheaper, faster, more reliable. In what ways? What are the radical innovations happening now using technology in the customer interface in your company? Have you undertaken the relevant internal changes needed to project yourself as a customer centric organization and are geared to align this with the emerging technology to provide customised services?

The way I see it, technology is creating greater transparencies between organisations and their clients. By helping track customers, it is enabling companies to provide them with better and proactive levels of service. Technology is only going to get bigger and better in the entire customer-vendor relationship.

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