

The Four Elements of Customer Satisfaction

Perfect Product, Caring Delivery, Timeliness, and an Effective Problem Resolution Process

There's not much point in taking a specialized upper-level course before you've studied the field's introductory concepts. In a similar vein, there are prerequisites to meet before you can learn to provide extraordinary, loyalty-building customer service.

First, become adept at meeting the more fundamental expectations of your customers. That is, learn to make them *satisfied*.

What does a satisfied customer look like? She thinks your business offers a reasonable solution that it delivers well. If *asked*, she'll say nice things about you. But although she may have some warm feelings for your business, she's not yet an advocate for your brand, and, unlike a truly loyal customer, she can still be wooed away. A merely satisfied customer is still a free agent, exploring the marketplace.

She still has a wandering eye.

Nonetheless, simple customer satisfaction is one of the underpinnings of the exceptional relationship we call true customer loyalty. And,

fortunately, customer satisfaction is based on four predictable factors. Customers are satisfied whenever they consistently receive:

1. A perfect product
2. Delivered by a caring, friendly person
3. In a timely fashion
... with (because any of those three elements may misfire)
4. The support of an effective problem resolution process

A Perfect Product

Customers want defect-free products and services. You need to design your product or service so that it can be expected to function perfectly *within foreseeable boundaries*.

Things will sometimes go wrong. Your products, and people, will sometimes fail due to unpredictable circumstances. But sloppy or incomplete product or service design is, from a customer's perspective, intolerable.

Suppose you're staffing an online photo lab. Let's call it Stutterfly. You know from experience that one prepress technician (PPT) is needed for every 100 orders in-house. Now suppose you want to be ready for a maximum of 1,000 photo orders at any given time. How many prepress technicians do you need? Ten? Perhaps. But a "perfectly designed" answer needs to take into account absenteeism, last minute no-shows, and vacation time: any reasonably foreseeable scenario that could prevent you from actually having ten PPTs on hand to cover the orders in-house. In addition, your "perfect design" needs to include provisions for getting these technicians all the supplies, tools, resources, and information they'll need to do a great job.

Of course, something that is not realistically foreseeable could still happen: six of your ten PPTs might get the flu on the same night, or a major earthquake could knock a paper mill that supplies you out of commission. The product will not always be perfectly deliverable. We know.

But you must design it to be perfect—foreseeing all that is foreseeable.

Designing the Defects In

Obviously, getting planes in the air and to their destination is complex and filled with variables. Any reasonable passenger will understand that delivery of this “product” (like most things in today’s marketplace, actually a combination of a service and a product) will be flawed from time to time. But that’s no excuse for designing the flaws in. Ask the frequent travelers you know if anyone has experienced a single on-time departure out of LaGuardia Airport on a Friday afternoon after 5 p.m. (Maybe our luck is extraordinarily bad, but we’re still waiting for our first one!) This service, in other words, is *designed to fail to function* within foreseeable boundaries.

Delivered by Caring People

Your perfect product now requires caring, friendly people to deliver it. Let’s visualize just how a product and its delivery work together to determine satisfaction. Let’s make the setting Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta. Picture featureless corridors, long ticket counters, and the reason you wish you didn’t have to exchange your ticket a few days before Thanksgiving: a maze of people waiting behind a roped line to speak with any of five agents. Eventually, you make it to the front of the maze. Now you’re first in line, waiting politely for an agent at the counter to help you.

What do you hear?

“Next!”

Hmmm. As you approach the agent, you see that her “Next” was premature.

So you stand there, waiting for her to finish the previous transaction.

Finally she finishes keyboarding, looks at you, and says curtly: “Yes?”

You answer, “My plans have changed. Would it be possible to exchange this ticket so I can fly to Washington Dulles?”

“Uh huh . . .”

She takes your ID, gives you your boarding pass—and never looks up at you.

“Next!”

You take the boarding pass, go through security, get on the plane, and land safely and on time at your destination. So, you got a perfect product: a product that would appear, if anyone charted it out, to be 100 percent free of defects.

But do you feel satisfied?

Of course not.

OK. Now let’s change the script. Same airport, same maze, same line of people ahead of you in the maze. Again, you eventually make it to the front of the line, where you quietly wait for an agent to call on you.

“May I help the next person in line, please?” (You step forward.)

“Good morning, Sir. Thank you for your patience. How are you today?”

“Not bad at all, thanks, considering, and how are you?”

“Just fabulous. How may I assist you today?”

“My plans have changed, and I need to get on a flight to Washington Dulles.”

“It’ll be my pleasure. I hear the weather isn’t actually too bad in the D.C. area this weekend. Are you visiting family for Thanksgiving?”

“No, it’s just business. But I’ll be flying back right afterward and will get home for the holiday.” (She checks your ID and hands you your boarding pass.)

“Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

“No, I think that’s all.”

“Well then, have a splendid day.”

“Thank you very much.”

“*Thank you for flying with us.*”

How was *this* interaction? It was great, right? An interaction like this, with just a single caring, friendly employee, can make us feel good about doing business with an entire company.

Now you get through the long security line and to the gate. Only at that point do you notice your boarding pass says *Dallas*, not Dulles.

Uh . . . *now* are you satisfied?

Again, no—not with a defective product or service, no matter how warmly delivered.

In a Timely Fashion

In our world of iPhones and IM, your customers get to decide what is and isn't an appropriate timeline. A perfect product delivered *late* by friendly, caring people *is the equivalent of a defective one*.

Customer experiences guide their expectations, so on-time delivery standards continue to get tougher all the time. What your customer today thinks of as on-time delivery is not only stricter than what her parents would have tolerated, it's stricter than what even her older sister would have tolerated.

Amazon.com's tight supply and delivery chain has single-handedly raised the timeliness bar in the online world, but that's not the end of the story: Their speedy online delivery has raised *offline* expectations as well. In fact, the concept of special ordering for walk-in customers is obsolete for most brick-and-mortar merchants. If you don't have it in stock when a customer walks in, a customer's just going to go online and find it for herself.

This impatience rule can only be disregarded when a customer is commissioning something truly custom, something specially made by you for her alone, such as fine art, cabinetry, or a gourmet meal. In fact, for some truly custom items, providing something *too quickly* can be equated by customers with low quality or prefab work. The trick here

is the same: Learn your own customers' definition of "on time," and obey that definition—not your own.

Reset Customer Expectations You Can't Meet

Suppose you are a lawyer. Your client calls and leaves a request on your voicemail. Without comment, you begin the research your answer will require. Proudly—four days after the client's request—you submit your carefully crafted, well-researched opinion, only to find yourself talking to an irritated client! Why? What's the matter with this guy? Doesn't he understand how complex this issue is?

Well, actually, no. In your client's eyes, you are an expert in everything related to law, and it's his expectation that you'll respond to a request promptly. Instead, you took four days to get back to him.

With a better understanding of your client's expectations, you could have picked up the phone and made a call at the outset: "Hello, Bill. This is Jenny. Thank you for your request. It is a fairly complicated issue, and I'll need a couple of days to research it. I'll send you the opinion by the end of the week. Talk with you soon!" You could have taken the initiative, reset the expectation, and prevented the erosion of confidence and trust you've now suffered. You would have made him feel all the more grateful for your hard work when you eventually do call. This approach of setting clear expectations for deadlines is simple, yet curiously uncommon. Try it on for size.

With the Support of an Effective Problem Resolution Process

Service breakdowns and other problems experienced by customers are crucial emotional moments in a business relationship. Therefore, solv-

ing these problems will have an outsized impact on your business success. That's why you need an effective problem resolution process.

Effective problem resolution sounds like a modest goal. But so does reaching base camp—until you find out you're climbing Denali. A big reason it's so tough? *Effective* cannot be measured by whether you have restored the situation to the pre-problem status quo. *Effective* is measured by whether you have restored customer satisfaction.

This can be challenging, but it's well worth it. Resolve a service problem effectively and your customer is *more* likely to become loyal than if she'd never run into a problem in the first place. (On this point, our studies and practical experience are 100 percent conclusive.) Why is this so? *Because until a problem occurs, the customer doesn't get to see us fully strut our service.* Of course, we would never recommend that you make mistakes on purpose so you can engineer a splendid recovery and win yourself some client love in the process. But it is a silver lining to keep in mind when you're staring down a problem.

The topic of effective problem resolution, especially the handling of service breakdowns, is so crucial that it will fill all of Chapter Four. First though, we need to explore a fundamental tool: *language*. Because no matter what lengths you go to for your customers, if you don't use the right words with them, they'll never appreciate how good they have it. Language is crucial to how a customer experiences your business, which makes it a critical element of your brand. It's the next stop on our itinerary.