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6 Ways to Get Customer Feedback to Improve Your Service Brand

by Joel Garfinkle

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Brand perception is simply the way customers perceive your organization. This perception is influenced by many factors: your products or services, style of communication, corporate culture, and the quality of service you provide at every "perception point."

A prime example of effective branding is Starbucks. Core values of the company are service and relationship and this is clearly articulated in the brand message. Starbucks isn't simply a place to buy a cup of coffee, it is distinguished by offering a personal touch to service. Regular customers at many Starbucks locations form relationships with baristas who know their preferred beverage and other details of their lives. Starbucks has also given rise to the term "third place" since it accommodates both social and business meetings. Walk into any Starbucks and you will invariably see students and business people sipping their lattes with laptops open.

Danny Myers, CEO of Union Square Hospitality Group in New York City, built his restaurant business on the concept of exceptional service, not only to patrons, but to employees as well. Myers believes that happy employees provide excellent customer service, thereby serving as effective ambassadors for the company brand.

Managing Customer Perceptions

Many businesses spend a large amount of time deciding how they want to be perceived and then communicating this message via advertising and other promotional activities. At the same time, they devote little attention to following up with customers to verify whether the company's brand message is being accurately perceived. Feedback is essential to ensure that your branding and marketing efforts are aligned with actual customer experiences. Your company brand is perhaps your firm's most essential asset. It drives customer loyalty which, in turn, drives revenue.

Because branding is so critical to your company's long-term success, your firm should constantly be evaluating the alignment between brand identity (what your company thinks it is) and brand image (what customers perceive it to be).

Here are some six simple strategies to obtain brand feedback from customers.

1. Ask new customers why they chose your service brand. This can be hard to do as many customers will feel uncomfortable speaking with a company representative directly. For this reason, it is important to establish a comfortable rapport so that customers feel they may speak openly and honestly. An alternative is to hire a consultant to perform this survey as a third party may uncover sensitive information more readily.

2. Ask current and past customers what differentiates your service brand from others. Another approach is to ask customers what thought or image first comes to mind when they consider your company. Then the first thought or image when considering a competitor's brand. There are no right or wrong answers. Take each

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Voice of the Customer

"The group discussions are outstanding! I feel empowered to make a difference as an individual and on the team.

Now I think more about our customers (and less about the rules) and try to find new things to do to make my customers happy."

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answer at face value and recognize that the stated differences will be very instructive in terms of how your brand is being perceived by your target audience. Any misalignments uncovered with regard to your branding message and audience perception can then be readily addressed.

3. Who are your repeat customers? Look for areas of commonality among your repeat customers. This is an important clue to how your brand is perceived in the marketplace. For example, do your customers seem to fall within a certain age or demographic group? Contact these repeat patrons to understand what drives their customer loyalty.

4. Is your business obtaining referrals? If your brand is perceived accurately by customers, then word-of-mouth is a great source of new business. What customers say about your company's brand speaks louder than any promotional message.

5. Contact customers who chose a competitor. Assume a friendly tone and stress that your call is not sales-oriented. You simply wish to follow up on why they didn't choose your firm. Again, a consultant performing this survey may obtain more detailed information during a conversation with a company employee.

6. Is your brand an integral part of your core values? Both Starbucks and Union Square align their service branding strategy with company values. Company core values are just that: they are the rock upon which your firm is built and, as such, unchanging. Building your service brand on core values ensures message consistency and facilitates the development strong and attractive of a brand image in the minds of your audience.

Spending time understanding the perception of your service brand is a highly valuable exercise. It ensures that your firm is reaching its intended audience and aligning customer expectations with service delivery.

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Joel Garfinkle is a leadership coach and the author of [Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level](#).

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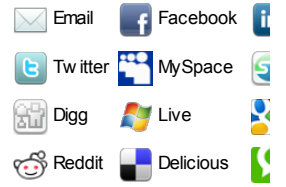
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