

Improvements to Make if you're Getting Bad Customer Service Survey Results



By MICAH SOLOMON

Disappointing results on a customer service survey can be more than demoralizing. They can bode ill for future financial results and even directly threaten your livelihood. The problem is unlikely to be the survey design (though that's possible). More likely, the problem is that you really need to improve! Yet, in the face of poor scores, what happens at many organizations is denial and rationalization. A lot of non-productive time is devoted to explaining away why your scores aren't really all that bad; defending yourself with comparisons to even poorer performers within your industry; or debating the survey methodology, questions, or sample size.



Why all this yammering instead of getting to work on turning things around? I think a big cause of this procrastination is not knowing how to improve. So, let's face down that issue right away. Here are ten steps to take to improve.

1. Build out your broad-based customer service standards and guidelines.

Widely useful guidelines and techniques that apply to almost any interaction as well as more specific customer interaction standards and protocols (instructions for particular situations that come up at your business: how to greet, seat, and guide a customer arriving in your showroom, how to transfer a phone call when a customer sounds impatient, how to open and pass through a door for a customer when you both arrive at the same time, and more).

2. Create a short, bedrock statement of principles: your customer service constitution.

List eight to twelve principles that make up your philosophy for customer-facing interactions. (For example, “When it comes to interacting with customers, there are no ‘not my job’ tasks in our organization.”)

3. Create abbreviated versions of these two documents that can be placed at locations where employees will need immediate reminders: at your reception desk, at POS (point of sale), at every phone or terminal.

While you are at it, create an abbreviated, laminated version that can be retained for easy reference by every employee. If this sounds goofy, prepare to risk feeling goofy at first. It will pay off.

4. Double down on customer service training.

Spelling out standards on paper is essential, but obviously not enough. Training is essential in the foundations of superior customer service and in specific standards and protocols.

5. Build out a plan for daily reinforcement of customer service excellence.

Intermittent training is essential, but you also need something every day. To some extent this will be the collateral you create and distribute (Step 4, above), but you need a human, spoken element as well. A pre-shift meeting (10 minutes, at most 15) where only customer service and cultural issues are discussed is an excellent way to fulfill this need.

6. Review and revamp your talent management approach including what is most to the point.

How you recruit, select, and onboard your customer-facing employees, how you support them in their positions and career goals so they can grow within your organization to the benefit of customers, themselves, and the organization as a whole. Maybe this step sounds like too much in-depth work to do when you have survey results to turn around. But I’ve never encountered a company that succeeds in giving superior customer service without giving this step their full attention and commitment.

7. Initiate a workforce empowerment approach.

Give the power (and financial resources) directly to your front line that is needed to solve customer complaints and challenges—as well as what is needed to make the most of opportunities to “wow.” The most famous models here are probably the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Nordstrom, and Zappos.

8. Implement a step-by-step customer service recovery procedure.

To avoid ever making a mistake is impossible, partly because mistakes happen, and partly because customers often define “mistakes” differently than we expect them to. It’s essential to have a defined, effective, formalized customer service recovery procedure in place.

9. Have a mystery shopping-style review done of your operation.

Hire a professional, or, if that’s impossible, find a friend you trust who is unknown to your employees. It’s likely that you’ll get lucky right away through this step, that you’ll discover customer service experience missteps and miscalculations that can be easily corrected. If you think you don’t need to do this step—after all, your survey will have told you what’s wrong with your customer service—think again. The survey was designed without knowledge of what in particular may be going wrong, and may not afford survey respondents a way to convey what precisely is frustrating them or ticking them off. A pair (or pairs) of sharp eyes, unconstrained by a preconceived set of survey questions, will give you a better sense of what’s wrong, and may catch things the survey did not.

10. Review your customer-facing digital assets.

Logically this is part of item #9, but I have broken it out separately so that it doesn't get overlooked. Another example from my own consulting work: One of my client companies had a beautiful and functional website—but only if you were a returning visitor. First-time visitors were subjected to an aggressive “sign up for our newsletter!” splash screen that was a turnoff. My client was wholly unaware of this because, of course, it had been a long, long time since he had been a first-time visitor to his own site.

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