ANALYSIS

YOUR CUSTOMERS ARE SPEAKING

ARE YOU LISTENING?

AUGUST 2022

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Introduction

Today's print buyers have an ever-increasing number of choices for their communication needs. Even in our condensed industry, there are plenty of print service providers (PSPs)—both online and within our local communities—available to serve the needs of brand owners and individuals. What sets one PSP apart from another is often based on quality and price. Experienced PSPs also rely on delivering high-quality service to win business from the competition. Even so, quality is often an ambiguous term; not all customers will have the same opinion about what quality means. Instead of trying to guess what your customers want, what if you could develop a program to hear exactly what your customers are saying about their needs and how these needs align with your products and services?

Dr. Joyce Brothers once said, "listening, *not imitation*, is the sincerest form of flattery." The challenge today is the influx of channels that need to be heard. E-mails, social media, direct mail, phone calls, and meetings are all sources of actionable information. Simply learning to listen better can help you stand out in today's highly competitive market, but doing so requires a system that addresses the Voice of your Customer (VoC). Much like a Hi-Fi receiver, your VoC program must be built to gather signals from various incoming sources. When this process is done well, it enables you to translate the jargon of important customer input into a clear picture of what they need to thrive in today's business world.

Receiving the Signal

VoC programs were popularized in the early 1990s. Their intent is obvious—to gain feedback from customers in their own language. Today, it's not uncommon for business owners to limit their VoC efforts to surveys. Like a strong antenna, though, a good VoC program enables you to receive different bands of frequencies (i.e., information) from the various sources your customers engage with. The key is making it easy for clients to provide their evaluation of your services through many different touchpoints. These touchpoints can of course include surveys, but don't overlook the value of social media, online reviews, focus groups, and direct feedback. If you favor certain sources but ignore others, you'll likely miss valuable information.

If VoC programs were easy, everyone would be using them… or so the saying goes. In reality, though, they don't need to be complicated. Start by organizing a dedicated VoC team. Next, create a hub for the data you're looking to collect and establish metrics that are critical to your VoC initiative. Keep in mind that quantitative as well as qualitative metrics are required to remain relevant. Assign people to sweep the likeliest places to source customer and industry feedback. Set up hashtag and Google alerts for any mentions of your company or relevant print topics on social feeds. Positive feedback is just

as pertinent as negative feedback. When customers offer their praises, it's often to extol a virtue or service that was particularly impactful to them. Don't let those virtues be secrets! Be sure to log as much feedback as possible, and remain open to questions and complaints alike. These can be your windows to future growth.

As noted earlier, surveys are a reliable way to gain more insight about a customer's experience. Listening means asking questions that lead to actionable change rather than seeking self-indulgence and validation. If you really want to hear what your customers have to say, ask them for meaningful insights rather than inviting them to rate your service. Ask "What was unique about our service?" or "What could we improve?" You might think there are more and more surveys circulating these days, and you'd be right… so don't fatigue your client base by asking too many questions and soliciting a survey response with every transaction. Remember that all interactions can shape your customers' overall experience with your company, so make sure their experience is pleasant. Through it all, your message must be that you are focusing on their needs first.

Processing the Signal

Quite often, customers won't take the time to provide feedback to a company or brand signaling that everything is ok. When it's time to make a purchase, customers will certainly articulate what they want, but most won't identify the problems that your offerings will address. By giving your customers a voice, you can provide solutions that they might not have thought possible. Consequently, engineering a VoC system that translates your customers' wavelengths before during and after they do business with you can drive value and innovation.

Think of it this way—just about anyone who is responsible for business growth can describe their perfect or ideal customer. In essence, these leaders formally or informally work from a customer profile or persona to quickly determine fit and identify opportunities. When you understand the industry, the role your customer plays in that industry, and their common pain points, it's much easier to connect the dots between what your customers share and the actual problems that need to be solved. According to Keypoint Intelligence's most recent marketing communications research, 57% of print buyers are willing to pay more for brochures that deliver higher quality. By listening to and hearing what your customers value and what they view as shortcomings, you can reinforce how your brand's offerings can align with their greater needs.

Over time, your VoC program will pinpoint your customers' needs while also showing patterns of tone. Everyone has a preferred method of communication, and these preferences can be very specific. Some brands might capitalize words to emphasize them, but consumers might mistake capitalization as a form of aggression. According to a study

by Binghamton University, "the inclusion of the period in text responses may be perceived as abrupt." In addition, "one-word texts with periods were understood as more negative than those same responses without periods." Yet many aren't aware of that perception and are simply trying to use proper punctuation. This is why listening over time rather than relying on a single channel for VoC is so critical. We all know how easy it can be to misunderstand a written response. A system that is dedicated to listening enables better attunement to your customers' true voice.

Transmitting the Signal

Did you know that you can actually hear a smile on the phone? The tone of your voice changes when you smile, and it's audibly perceptible. The next time you're on the phone, be conscious of the way your voice changes in various scenarios with your family, close friends, not-so-close friends, and especially with your customers! Tone, vocabulary, and even personality can shape your audience's expectations, and the same goes for your customers. How you translate the voice of your customers is just as important as gathering it. This is a topic for a different article, but learning to recognize the questions that must be answered is an added bonus that can be gained from a solid VoC program.

Unifying your VoC efforts across your entire organization facilitates a holistic approach. With a good understanding of why understanding the voice of your customers is an important practice, each employee can be positioned to spot subtle conveyances and unmistakable flags. This means that your brand can communicate its value regardless of how a customer interacts with you.

The Bottom Line

Customer feedback is the driving force behind revenue growth. A strong Voice of the Customer program can be a competitive advantage, don't keep it a secret! By informing customers and prospects that you've established a VoC program, you can demonstrate your commitment to helping them solve problems. As a result, you will be better able to listen to, translate, and adjust to fit your customers' changing needs. Obtaining clear signals from your customers should be an ongoing process, not a one-time event. It's very likely you already gather details along the way during your processes to continually improve how you serve your customers. Perhaps it's time to formalize your efforts… you might just find a few golden nuggets!

opinion

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As part of the Business Development Strategies Consulting Service at Keypoint Intelligence, Karen Kimerer has experienced the many challenges of expanding current market opportunities and securing new business. She has developed a systematic approach to these opportunities, addressing the unique requirements of becoming a leader in our changing industry.

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