

Customer Perceptions Matter More than the Truth

By Marilyn Suttle

When you go to great lengths to offer stellar customer service, it can be shocking to discover that your customer isn't happy. Proving a customer wrong, when you know you're right, is the quickest way to lose business. What can you do to manage customer perceptions? Here's an example.

The Green Company (featured in my book) is an award winning builder in New England. For a home builder, a critical time for managing customer perceptions is during the closing, the contract-signing meeting during which ownership of a new home is officially turned over to the home buyer. The Green Company's goal is not only to deliver the home 100 percent complete at that time, but also to make sure that the customer agrees that it is 100 percent complete. Its employees know that the customer's perception can be far different from the company's, so the communication that occurs at closing is critical.

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Home buyers typically see a warranty issue that comes up at the closing as a failure to complete the house. To counteract that perception, they do a walk-through a few days ahead of time. Then, they make sure the customer comes back through a half-hour before closing, so they know that all the issues were fixed. That gets them to a psychological perception of completion. The next problem that may come up is then considered a warranty item by both the company and the customer.

How well do you monitor customer perceptions? It's not so easy, because customers are human and humans can view situations in unexpected ways.

Case in Point:

When I was six years old, my parents invited cherished relatives from out of town over for dinner. When they arrived, I was introduced to an elderly couple. I liked them, especially when the gentleman said he had a gift for me. He pulled out his wallet and gave me several bills.

I knew what money looked like. It was green, but these bills were filled with bright colors like blue and purple. I said, "This isn't real money."

Can you believe, that old man had the nerve to lie to me? He said, "Yes, it is real money." I was horrified. I looked at my parents. They were being polite, smiling and urging me to say, thank you.

I choked out a small thank you and ran to my room. The more I looked at that play money, the angrier I felt. Did they think I was a baby who couldn't tell my colors? I walked over to the wastebasket in the corner of my room. I took that play money and ripped it into teeny tiny little pieces. I couldn't wait show my Mom what I did, and hear her say, "Good job, Marilyn! They didn't fool you."

As I was getting ready for bed that night, I showed my mom the ripped up money with pride. She started screaming, "What have you done? You tore it up so small. We can't even tape it back together." She ran to get my father. They were both beyond upset. I was confused. Once my parents calmed down, they explained to me that Canadian money comes in different colors.

It took a while for it to sink in. The relatives from Canada had been telling the truth. It was real money.

I was so sure that I was right. **Everything in my set of experiences proved I was right, but I wasn't.** Could your customers be having the same experience with your company? Here are a few quick tips to get in touch with your customers' perceptions:

- **Educate your customers.** Today's consumers want to be informed. Use a multitude of ways to help them to better understand and navigate the processes, products, and services you offer.
- **Define and clarify.** The Green Company does this by taking their customers on a walk-through a few days before closing, and again on the day of closing, to cement in the buyers mind that the home is being delivered complete as promised. They define and clarify the difference between completion and warranty work. Consider what changes you can put in place to facilitate a clearer perception at your company.
- **Seek and respond to feedback.** If the customer perceives poor service, find out about it. An unhappy customer, properly handled, can turn into a raving fan.

- **Get curious.** Do not buy into the saying, “No good deed goes unpunished.” When customers don’t believe you did an exceptional job for them, get curious instead of upset. Your curiosity will help you uncover the communication breakdown and set you up to ultimately succeed.

It doesn't matter if you can prove to your customer that you are right and justified. Customer perception matters more than the truth, so take steps to manage those perceptions.

Managing people's perceptions is a skill that will serve you well in every area of life. And the lessons learned have a funny way of repeating themselves. I recently gave my seven year old niece a two dollar bill. She furrowed up her brow and said, “There’s no such thing as a two dollar bill . . .”

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