

Meet Customer Needs

Customers are the lifeblood of an organization, and it's often the little things that make the biggest difference in creating loyal customer relationships or losing customers to a competitor. How well your organization meets and exceeds customers' needs and expectations can determine whether your organization sustains leadership in the marketplace. Understanding and anticipating customer needs, dealing effectively with customer feedback and metrics, and implementing employee training programs that create exceptional customer service values

all contribute to creating a customer experience that fosters loyalty, trust, and referrals.

Happy, loyal customers are worth the investment in time and resources it takes to create a dynamic, responsive customer-oriented culture within your organization. Engaging your key customers and developing a deep understanding of who your customers are positions you to anticipate their needs and sustain strong customer relationships.

Meet Customer Needs

In this chapter, we will cover the following areas:

- ▶ Understand who your customers are
- ▶ Identify and anticipate customer requirements, expectations, and needs
- ▶ Develop and promote a clear understanding of the customer's business
- ▶ Provide customers with a variety of options for offering feedback
- ▶ Respond to customer feedback
- ▶ Continually search for ways to improve customer/client service
- ▶ Ensure a level of customer service that differentiates your organization from the competition
- ▶ Provide value to customers beyond their expectations
- ▶ Ensure that customer issues are resolved
- ▶ Meet commitments to customers/clients
- ▶ Hire the right people to meet customer needs
- ▶ Train for customer focus
- ▶ Set high standards for customer service
- ▶ Measure customer focus performance
- ▶ Motivate and reward excellence in customer focus
- ▶ Develop and provide a unified approach to serving the customer
- ▶ Facilitate multiple connections between the company and customer organizations
- ▶ Find ways to involve coworkers who don't normally have contact with customers
- ▶ Develop and provide flexible options to enable employees to meet customer needs
- ▶ Create systems and processes that make it easy for customers to do business with your company
- ▶ Understand and address the customer implications of process changes
- ▶ Remove barriers so you can provide exceptional customer service

Und
▼
Ask
cust
add
miss

Understand who your customers are

▼
Ask people to list their customers. If necessary, add to the list. People often miss internal customers.

Creating committed customers is the goal of successful organizations. Loyal customers fuel success and growth. They are one of the best measures of corporate performance because loyalty can be achieved only by creating superior value. In order to create customer value, you must first know who your customers are. Consider the following suggestions to help you define your customer base:

- ▶ Recognize whether your customers are individuals, businesses, or other types of organizations.
- ▶ Talk with your marketing group to learn what they know about your customers. It is likely that they have already identified customer groups or segments and can give you information about each one.
 - ▷ What are the customer segments?
 - ▷ Who are your best customers? Why?
 - ▷ What level of penetration do you have within each customer? Within each customer segment?
 - ▷ How are your customers changing?
 - ▷ What are new customer targets or emerging customer segments?
- ▶ Conduct a survey to learn who your most loyal customers are and why. Then investigate to what degree the customer value chain operates in ways that support your value proposition. Make appropriate changes to ensure continued customer loyalty.
- ▶ Understand how your customers differ from one another and the implications for you and your teams. For example, you may need to offer a greater variety of product features, different kinds of customer services, or different kinds of customer support.
- ▶ If your marketing department has not already done so, separate your customers into relevant groups: age, ethnicity, mobility, geography, buying patterns. This will help you adjust your value proposition to each customer group. For example, health club customers who come in the early morning are usually different from those who come midday. Members who are recovering from surgery or health problems have different needs than those who are into competitive athletics.

Find out what people know about how your product or service is used by customers. If they have not seen it in use, encourage them to do so.

- ▶ Spend time with customers at their site. See your products and services in use. Talk to people who work with the services and products about their experiences, their likes and dislikes about the service or product, what is easy or difficult about working with it, and so on.
- ▶ Talk with new customers to find out about their businesses. Ask them questions such as:
 - ▷ What do I need to know about your business?
 - ▷ How does your company position itself in the marketplace?
 - ▷ What changes do you anticipate in the business environment in the near future?
 - ▷ What key challenges are you facing?
 - ▷ What are your current opportunities?
- ▶ Sign up for RSS feeds to receive automatic updates about your customers.
- ▶ Periodically update your information on existing customers. Talk to customers about their business and do a media search on the Internet. Then analyze the information you have collected. Are there any trends?
- ▶ Think about things from a customer's perspective. What do you wish your business partners knew about you and your business or marketplace? Make sure you know those things about your customers.
- ▶ Invite customers to speak to your employees and customer teams about their companies.
- ▶ Make use of internal resources. Ask people who are knowledgeable about different customers and their businesses to share their knowledge with your team.
- ▶ Stay up to date on major business news. Read at least one local and one national business publication—for example, a regional business journal and *The Wall Street Journal*—regularly. Watch for news on your customers and their businesses, and share your findings with your team.

Provide customers with a variety of options for offering feedback

People who strive to create a customer-centered organization view feedback as an essential tool. They seek feedback to learn what their customers need and want, and to show their interest in their customers. As you seek feedback from your customers, consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Ask customers how they would like to provide feedback to your organization. Have they been able to find avenues for offering feedback?
- ▶ Teach your people how to ask for, listen to, and accept feedback in a constructive way. Set a clear expectation that customer feedback is critical to the success of the business.
- ▶ Design feedback systems tailored to each customer segment. For example:
 - ▷ *Strategic accounts*: use a structured, in-depth interviewing process to deepen your understanding of their business needs.
 - ▷ *Smaller accounts*: have your frontline customer service or sales team use a telephone or electronic feedback process.
 - ▷ *Consumers*: provide an easily accessible vehicle such as a response section on your Web site.
- ▶ Personally spend time with customers. There is no substitute for hearing directly from the customer.
- ▶ Take notes on the feedback you receive. Review your notes every month and keep track of trends, such as the number of customer complaints about a particular product.
- ▶ In addition to talking with customers directly, use third parties to provide objective feedback and information from customers. Customers may tell third parties something they wouldn't tell you.
- ▶ Act on the feedback you receive and let customers know what you have done. Close the feedback loop so that customers know their feedback is valued and used.

Encourage people to ask customers how easy it is for them to provide feedback.

Respond to customer feedback

Review recent customer feedback. Check to see if people are acting on the feedback. If not, ask why.

An executive once said, "Talking to customers tends to counteract the most self-destructive habit of great corporations—that of talking to themselves." Businesses have two choices when it comes to seeking feedback from customers: they can choose to know what's on customers' minds or choose not to know. To encourage and be more receptive to customer feedback, consider these suggestions:

- ▶ Treat customers' perceptions as reality, because they *are* reality for your customers. Take their comments seriously. Ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand the message.
- ▶ Listen for information beyond specific product needs. This has been shown to be the greatest skill difference between the most successful and least successful salespeople. Listen for:
 - ▷ Their requirements.
 - ▷ Expectations of you and your organization.
 - ▷ What would exceed their expectations.
 - ▷ Frustrations and concerns.
 - ▷ What keeps your customers awake at night.
 - ▷ Hints of dissatisfaction.
 - ▷ The underlying need, not just the solution.
 - ▷ Their feelings about you and their relationship with you.
- ▶ Welcome critical comments. Most lost customers leave without complaining, which gives you no opportunity to serve them better.
- ▶ Summarize customer comments and develop an action plan. Review the plan with key customers to ensure that it addresses their most critical needs.
- ▶ Commit yourself to responding to the concerns you hear. Dissatisfied customers may tell as many as 20 people that they are unhappy with the way you do business.
- ▶ Determine who needs to know about customer feedback, and plan when and how to tell them.

- ▶ Consider an annual or quarterly meeting with long-term customers to discuss changing needs, solve problems, and generate ideas for improvements. Include all key stakeholders from both your organization and your customer's organization.
- ▶ Notice how customer feedback is received in your organization. Is it taken seriously, or do you hear sarcastic or belittling comments about customer feedback?
- ▶ If your organization does not respect customer feedback, take action. Talk directly to people who do not take customers seriously and drive home the point that you are in business because of customers. Each employee's job is to add value to customers.

Continually search for ways to improve customer/client service

▼
Excellent customer service begins with a discovery process. As you learn about your customers, you can tailor your actions to meet their specific needs. In return, they will view you and your organization as being responsive and dedicated to their satisfaction. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Gather all the key people who work with a customer. Evaluate the current state of customer service. Identify what you know and don't know about the customer's satisfaction. Discuss how you can create seamless service among groups. Use specific examples to highlight what works and what needs to be improved.
- ▶ Ask people in your area to describe the obstacles that prevent them from delivering top-notch customer service. For example:
 - ▷ Individuals lack the authority to make quick decisions.
 - ▷ Flawed processes delay production or delivery of a product or service.
 - ▷ Employees aren't rewarded for helping customers.
- ▶ Ask clients to describe any frustrations they have experienced in working with your organization. Look for themes or patterns.
- ▶ Check frequently to see if your clients' requirements and expectations have changed. Use information from interviews, surveys, focus groups, hotlines, and help desks.

Have the person ask customer-facing employees what the organization could do differently to serve customers better.

Meet Customer Needs

- ▶ Measure customer service activities by whether they truly add value to the customer's experience. Check to see if you're measuring success by whether people are busy or whether customers are satisfied.
- ▶ When clients begin by telling you what solution they want, take a moment to learn more about the problem. A more suitable solution—one that the customer is not aware of—may be available.
- ▶ Reflect on customer service you have received. What delighted you as a customer and what disappointed you? Apply this awareness to your own organization.
- ▶ Work with experienced colleagues who have a reputation for stellar customer service. Learn how they approach the issue of customer service and emulate their techniques.

Ensure a level of customer service that differentiates your organization from the competition



Customers expect excellent service. Organizations whose value proposition is that they know their customers well and that they meet customers' needs better than their competitors must provide a level of service that differentiates them from their competitors. Orchestrating the experience of the customer is perhaps the most vital step of building relationships and providing high-quality customer service. Consider the following suggestions to help your customers have an exceptional experience working with your organization:

Find out what the person knows about how your competitors work with customers.

- ▶ Stay attuned to your customer's experience with all parts of your organization. This will help you identify negative or unexpected outcomes, so you can rectify them quickly.
- ▶ Understand your competitors and their strengths. Talk with your competitors' customers to learn about their service.
- ▶ Guard against becoming out of touch. When an organization has been strong in an area, it is sometimes difficult to maintain that strength or to notice that it is not as strong as it used to be.

- ▷ Listen to feedback from new customers as well as established ones. Sometimes your new customers have information that you need to hear.
- ▷ Ask new employees for feedback about their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and of your customer service. They are less likely to be tainted by the past and may see things that you don't.
- ▶ Before you change a standard process to respond to a customer need, think about the impact the change will have on the customer.
- ▶ Use as many channels for communicating with customers as possible to increase the likelihood that customers will receive your message.
- ▶ Create customized solutions for your key accounts. With your largest accounts, it is a good investment for you and your team to tailor interactions to fit customers' unique needs, based on what you know about their expectations.
- ▶ Identify any systemic or organizational barriers that may prevent your employees from creating exceptional experiences for your customers. Brainstorm ways to remove the barriers. Examples of barriers include lack of authority to make quick decisions, lack of knowledge for understanding problems, and flawed processes that delay production or delivery.

Provide value to customers beyond their expectations

▼
When you understand your customers' requirements and expectations, you can create effective solutions that meet, and even exceed, their expectations, requirements, and needs. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Make a concerted effort to look at customers' stated and unstated needs. Talk with them in depth, so that you understand their current needs and the forces driving those needs, and can anticipate future needs. Also ask for their "must haves" and "nice to haves." Inquire about what would really delight them.

Meet Customer Needs

Discuss what your organization could do to delight customers and go beyond their expectations.

- ▶ Summarize customer needs and map them against what you are currently providing. Identify new opportunities.
- ▶ With customer teams, list problems and opportunities for which you currently see no solution or change in circumstance. Then challenge the team by stating that somewhere a competitor or future competitor is figuring out how to solve these problems. For example, patient compliance with medication is a big issue in health care. This is currently seen as a big problem with no solution. Whoever solves this problem will have a big advance on competitors, especially if the solution can't be duplicated easily.
- ▶ Probe to understand a customer's problem. This will help you design a solution that meets the customer's underlying need.
- ▶ Clarify your customers' definition of long-term value. If you assume you know what's best or what they consider important, you could be mistaken.
- ▶ Examine everything you do against these criteria: Does this contribute to meeting our customers' needs? Does it add value?
- ▶ Define and use a structured process to involve customers when you make product enhancements and develop new products. Also invite customers, suppliers, and distributors to develop effective work processes with you.
- ▶ Examine the flexibility and adaptability of your service systems to see if they are capable of meeting unique customer needs. Value-added service offerings can differentiate you from your competitors.
- ▶ Ask what barriers or processes prohibit frontline employees from delivering exceptional, above-and-beyond levels of service. For example, are there too many steps involved in handling a customer complaint? Do employees have the authority to provide solutions on the spot? Policies that enable a fast, courteous, and exceptional response to customers will give your frontline employees a lasting positive impression on customers.

Ensure tha

Talk about
that people
they are a
enough or

Ensure that customer issues are resolved

Customers judge your organization in two ways: how well you deliver on your commitments and how well you handle problems. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ When a customer issue arises, develop a clear understanding of the issue. You may assume you know the problem, but you may know only your organization's version of it. Ask the classic questions: who, what, where, when, why.
- ▶ Find out how the customer would like to resolve the issue. You need to fully understand what the customer expects. You might have a different idea of what a satisfactory resolution looks like.
- ▶ Recognize that you probably cannot resolve the issue by yourself. Involve all necessary people, particularly those who deliver the product or service.
- ▶ After you resolve the issue, establish processes to ensure that the issue will not arise again.
- ▶ Provide employees who work closely with customers the knowledge, skills, and authority to handle as many issues as they can as quickly as possible.
- ▶ Have clear escalation procedures so that people know when and why issues should be raised to higher levels in the organization. People should understand that the procedures are based on providing good solutions to customers, giving people information, and taking needed action. Escalation procedures are not and should not be designed to get people in trouble.
- ▶ Learn from your mistakes. Once you have solved a problem, meet with your team to explore how it happened and what you can do to prevent it from happening again.
- ▶ Keep metrics on issues and their resolutions. Use your team to identify themes and patterns so that you can resolve systemic issues.
- ▶ Mistakes made with internal customers may not seem important, but they are. Create the expectation that all mistakes, whether with internal or external customers, should be taken seriously. Create

Talk about customer issues that people do not believe they are able to resolve well enough or quickly enough.

Meet Customer Needs

processes for dealing with internal mistakes similar to those you have for external errors.

Meet commitments to customers/clients

▼
Listen to what people say in casual conversation about customers or clients. Provide feedback if customers or clients are not consistently respected.

Customers/clients want and deserve quick action. They want to deal with someone who has all of the information, expertise, and tools to help them quickly and competently. They also expect and deserve efficient follow-through, with no exceptions, on the commitments you have made to them. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Know your customer's requirements. Fully understand the commitments you have made. Be sure you know when, what, how, where, how many, to whom.
- ▶ Communicate the commitments to your team. Provide not only detailed information, but also a context for those who may not deal directly with the customer. Why does the customer need it this way? What are the consequences for the customer if your organization fails to meet its commitments?
- ▶ Ensure that there is a realistic plan to meet the requirements and that it is being implemented. Intervene to get a plan back on track if you need to.
- ▶ If time has passed since the commitments were made and discussed, double-check to be sure nothing has changed.
- ▶ Always deliver by the agreed-upon date.
- ▶ Champion the client's cause inside your organization. Identify other champions with whom you can team up to ensure the organization's response.
- ▶ If it appears that you have overcommitted, talk with the customer immediately. Understand the situation fully. Can you meet the customer's need in another way?
- ▶ Follow up to be sure the commitment was met. Just because the product left your organization on time doesn't necessarily mean the client received it as expected. Build this follow-up into your process.

- ▶ Measure your performance by establishing a tracking system. If you missed the mark, determine where the process got tied up and why. If the problem recurs, find ways to remove roadblocks and inefficiencies.
- ▶ Give your service people the resources they need to do their job, including quick access to up-to-date information on all customer transactions.
- ▶ Reduce the number of situations in which people need to obtain supervisor approval. Define the parameters within which your people work, and then give them the latitude to be flexible to meet each customer's needs.
- ▶ Recognize and reward individuals and teams who consistently meet delivery dates.

Hire the right people to meet customer needs

▼ Successful managers begin their efforts to meet customer needs by hiring the right people. Who the "right" people are is determined by your customer value proposition. To focus efforts, understand your customer value proposition and the talent needed to execute on it. Then use the requirements and expectations for each role and target your interview questions to identify these attributes. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ After identifying your customer value proposition, determine the critical roles necessary to achieve it. For example, if you promise to have the most advanced products in your industry, then a pivotal talent pool for you will be product design. If you promise quick, personal service, you need well-trained frontline customer service employees.
- ▶ Once you know the pivotal roles needed to meet customer needs, identify the skills, knowledge, experience, and attributes needed for those roles. Develop selection processes aimed at identifying and differentiating candidates based on these dimensions.
- ▶ Select for customer relationship management skills. Recognize the characteristics for good customer relationship management, including:
 - ▷ Strong oral communication skills.

Ask people who are skilled at understanding customer needs to work with those who are less knowledgeable.

Meet Customer Needs

- ▷ Cooperation and teamwork.
 - ▷ An even-tempered disposition.
 - ▷ Sensitivity to and concern for others.
 - ▷ Problem-solving and decision-making skills.
 - ▷ Commitment to excellence.
 - ▷ Enthusiasm and energy.
 - ▷ Flexibility and adaptability.
- ▶ Use behavioral interviewing techniques to predict how a candidate will behave on the job.
 - ▶ Consider involving key customers in the selection of new employees who will serve their account.
 - ▶ Consider using testing or assessments to identify strong candidates. For example, use a reliable test for customer service.

Train for customer focus

▼
Encourage people to ask their direct reports what they need to learn and understand about customer service to enhance their ability to relate to customers.

Once you have hired the best people and know your standards, get off to the right start with a strong orientation and comprehensive training. The benefits of this approach include higher levels of productivity, enhanced customer relationships, and more loyal employees. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Give people a brief overview of your customer vision and strategies. Outline your standards and expectations for managing customer relationships.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for people to see individuals interacting with customers in the way you want it done. It is very helpful to see what is expected.
- ▶ Design and present a fast-paced, energetic program that meets your specific, desired objective.
- ▶ Provide orientation to each part of your business so employees understand how to meet customer requirements at every step. Create appreciation for how all work groups come together to serve the customer.

- ▶ Have fun at the orientation. People who enjoy their training are more likely to enjoy the job and will treat customers better.
- ▶ Discuss how you build a prospect into a loyal customer. Ask your customer-focus stars to describe the roles they play in reaching that goal.
- ▶ Demonstrate options for handling customers' requests and objections. Model techniques for dealing with tough cases.
- ▶ Build your new employees' confidence. Show them the effort you made to hire the best people. Describe the results that the group can achieve together. Invite customers to talk about how your team contributes to their success.
- ▶ Provide on-the-job training. Training does not have take place in a classroom. Look for opportunities for people to train and practice on the job.
- ▶ Follow up on the training. Create an environment in which people can apply what they have learned. Provide appropriate feedback and coaching as they continue to develop their skills.

Set high standards for customer service

▼
A team that has common standards for providing superior service is more likely to deliver high levels of customer service. Communicating your standards to every level of your organization will help all teams focus on the same expectations for customer service. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Show how each job is a link in the chain of exceeding customer expectations. Consider using Michael Porter's legendary value-chain assessment to demonstrate this point. Communicate the message that no matter what the job is, it is valued and important.
- ▶ Help employees understand how your customers use your services and products and why they have specific requirements. For example, it is helpful to describe the effect on customers when you do not provide quick answers to their questions.

Meet Customer Needs

Provide examples of what you consider outstanding customer service. This will help people understand what the organization expects.

- ▶ Invite end users to talk with your team about their use of the service or product.
- ▶ Stress the benefits of the team's efforts for the entire organization and for each individual.
- ▶ Continually update what you know about customers. Share this information with everyone, especially people who have frequent customer contact.
- ▶ Demonstrate customer focus throughout the organization. Make it a priority for each work group to set customer-focused objectives. Incorporate these objectives into the performance-development process for each work group.
- ▶ Recognize and reward people who demonstrate high customer-service standards. This will encourage others to change their behavior accordingly.

Measure customer focus performance

▼
What gets measured gets managed. This adage certainly applies to creating a customer-focused organization. Organizations that are serious about improving their service to customers measure their performance in this area. In doing so, they communicate their resolve to all stakeholders: If customer loyalty is a priority, we will measure it, and we will manage our relationships to achieve it. You have many choices about establishing a measurement plan. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Ensure that there are clear expectations for customer focus. Involve both your employees and your customers in establishing expectations for and measures of outstanding performance.
- ▶ Be clear about your objectives. For example, you may intend to:
 - ▷ Establish a baseline measure.
 - ▷ Stay current on research and track trends.
 - ▷ Enhance relationships.
 - ▷ Evaluate individual performance.
 - ▷ Establish priorities for improvement.

Check to see how
using customer
performance m
process. It sho
important.

- ▷ Create loyalty.
- ▷ Determine compensation.
- ▶ Be clear about what you are measuring:
 - ▷ Overall satisfaction.
 - ▷ Customer commitment.
 - ▷ Transactional excellence.
 - ▷ Service quality.
 - ▷ Product performance.
 - ▷ Competitor analysis.
 - ▷ Market penetration.
- ▶ In measuring organizational performance, consider all stakeholders: customers, distributors, employees, internal customers, suppliers, alliance partners, investors, prospects.
- ▶ Look at measures of both outcome and process. In other words, examine the end results and measure how you achieved them. This will help you improve processes, which will lead to improved results.
- ▶ Determine whether the measurement process will be an ongoing, one-time, or periodic.
- ▶ Choose your method—survey (paper and pencil, electronic, telephone), face-to-face interview, or focus group—carefully. Success depends on selecting the method that is consistent with the objectives you have established.
- ▶ Select measurement tools to fit your objectives: Customer Value Analysis, Balanced Scorecard, Quality Function Deployment (QFD), and so forth.
- ▶ Involve internal stakeholders before launching a new measurement process. Many well-intentioned processes have failed because the right people weren't included in the planning phase.
- ▶ Shape the message you want to convey through your measurement process. Good measurement tools are designed to communicate a message as well as gather information. For example, a customer measurement process should convey "We are committed to enhancing

Check to see how you are using customer focus in the performance management process. It should be highly important.

our relationship with you,” not “This is the easiest way for us to get your feedback.”

- ▶ Make good use of the data you've gathered and make sure your customers know that you are using it. From their perspective, it's better to not ask their opinions at all than to ignore or not use the valuable feedback they provide in interviews, focus groups, and surveys.
- ▶ Analyze the data, identify the necessary actions or improvements to make, and communicate your plan or intention back to your customers.
- ▶ Periodically assess the systems and processes you establish to meet customer requirements. Discuss what worked well and what needs to be done differently. Periodic reviews are also a good way to catch problems before they become serious.

Motivate and reward excellence in customer focus



All employees want to know that their customer focus efforts are recognized and appreciated. Consider the following suggestions for motivating and rewarding your team members:

- ▶ Provide incentives for exceeding customer expectations and rewards for people who demonstrate superior performance.
- ▶ Recognize small wins and accomplishments as well as major ones.
- ▶ Gather recognition from many sources: customers, senior management, managers, peers, and suppliers. Make people's accomplishments widely known.
- ▶ Recognize that the value your employees create for customers is one of the most effective motivators. It taps their strong inner desire to provide excellent service to their customers.
- ▶ Realize that positive reinforcement often works best when it is linked to specific rewards. Different things, however, motivate people so tailor your rewards to the individual.
- ▶ Obtain feedback from people in the know—your customers. One way to get this valuable information is to provide evaluation cards. For example, in a consumer environment, place these cards near the

Discuss ways for customers to name team members who provide excellent service. Make sure people share this recognition with the individuals.

Develop an



service desk or have service employees hand them to your customers. This feedback can be used for rewarding good service.

- ▶ Reflect your customers' requirements and expectations in your performance appraisal factors. This will reinforce their importance and allow you to recognize people for meeting and exceeding the standards.
- ▶ If you have employees from diverse cultures, learn about recognition preferences online, through books and articles, by checking with experts, or by asking individuals. Remember that in some cultures, being publicly recognized is considered embarrassing and inappropriate.
- ▶ Create avenues for recognizing excellent performers. Establish ongoing programs and modify them frequently. Make sure some of your rewards are instant, immediately reinforcing excellent service.
- ▶ Celebrate when you achieve goals. Acknowledge the contributions of less-visible employees as well as those who have direct customer contact. Behind-the-scenes contributors seldom get the recognition they deserve.
- ▶ Recognize attempts to go beyond what the customer expects. Acknowledge and encourage these efforts.
- ▶ Reward people who overcome difficult obstacles to achieve results.

Develop and provide a unified approach to serving the customer

Everyone in your organization can provide feedback on how to improve, which will help create more loyal customer relationships. This includes people who work directly with customers (account managers, customer service representatives, receptionists, salespeople, service technicians) and people who rarely see a customer (engineering, operations, finance). To tap this resource, consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Communicate customer requirements and expectations to everyone in your organization whose work reaches the customer. Explain the reasons for the customer's requirements and expectations, and how meeting these standards will help customers achieve their goals.

Meet Customer Needs

Have the person identify top priorities for customer service across departments. Discuss how the approaches can be aligned.

- ▶ Assess whether the teams in your organization work together seamlessly. This will help you avoid situations in which customers receive five different calls from five different departments, all asking for the same information.
- ▶ Give your customers contact names and numbers within your organization. Make sure your team has access to updated customer information, is ready to answer questions, and is eager to solve problems.
- ▶ Set up a communication team for each customer. This team will be responsible for collecting information about the customer and updating people throughout the organization.
- ▶ Hold regular interdepartmental meetings to get a broader perspective on customer issues. This will help people understand how their work intersects with that of other departments and whether a solution from one group causes unnecessary headaches for another group.
- ▶ Recognize that competing priorities of different groups or departments—design and manufacturing, for example, or sales and operations—could affect the product or service you provide to your customer. Identify ways to gain commitment to total customer focus from all groups.
- ▶ Look for areas in which your group or organization is not using a unified approach. Meet with your peers and employees from all levels and functions to come up with concrete steps to rectify the situation.

Facilitate multiple connections between the company and customer organizations

▼
Your customers may be other businesses, but their representatives are real people in those organizations. Developing multiple relationships in your customer organizations builds deeper relationships and provides more connections between you and them. This is important for many reasons, including when turnover occurs in your or your customers' organizations. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Identify all the relationships you currently have within your customer organizations.

- ▶ Identify additional relationships you should have within the organizations. Review organizational charts to learn about their business structures. Identify key people at various levels and functions with whom you would like to build relationships.
- ▶ Create trust and openness with your key customers. Demonstrate interest in them as individuals and understanding of the strategic issues they face.
- ▶ Research your customers and become well versed in their organizations and industries. Check their Web sites frequently and look for press releases and earnings reports.
- ▶ Build relationships with people over time, paying attention to their needs and providing assistance.
- ▶ Build relationships by conducting in-depth interviews with each contact. This discovery process will uncover opportunities to work together in new ways.
- ▶ Make a professional connection:
 - ▷ Listen to customer problems intently.
 - ▷ As you talk to customers, use language that reflects your knowledge of their businesses.
 - ▷ Ask informed questions about their role or their business.
 - ▷ Share appropriate information about your business or your job.
- ▶ Make personal connections in ways appropriate to your culture and your customer's culture. For example, in the United States:
 - ▷ Make direct eye contact.
 - ▷ Smile warmly.
 - ▷ Make small talk about weekend plans, vacations, and so on.
 - ▷ Have lunch or dinner, and attend events together.
- ▶ Talk to your customers about the future direction of your company. This is likely to lead to a dialogue about their direction. Look for fit and congruency.
- ▶ Introduce your colleagues into customer organizations. Build a web of relationships that is strong enough to withstand transitions of people and roles.

Discuss ways that people can facilitate multiple connections between their company and customer organizations.

Meet Customer Needs

Find ways to involve coworkers who don't normally have contact with customers

▼ Coworkers who don't have direct contact with customers are untapped resources. They can teach you about how your products or services are created and delivered, they can see things you miss, and they can get satisfaction for their work that creates delighted customers. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Ask people to indicate whether they would like to be more directly involved in customer work. Discuss options for making this happen. This might be a great development opportunity for people who want to expand their skills or use existing skills in new ways.
- ▶ When customers visit your organization, introduce them to your team, including those who work behind the scenes. Describe the contributions each person makes and stress that the whole team contributes to the customer experience.
- ▶ Use cross-functional teams to address customer needs. Invite new team members to work on recurring problems. New people who have not tried to solve a problem before can introduce fresh thinking into the equation.
- ▶ Learn about your coworkers' interests, talents, and abilities. As you work on customer issues, look for ways to tap into those talents and abilities.
- ▶ Create an environment in which all employees feel comfortable offering ideas and suggestions, even in areas outside their current role or field of expertise.
- ▶ Reinforce the concept that everyone, regardless of his or her job, has an impact on customers. Help people make the connection between their work and customers.
- ▶ Don't assume that everyone wants to work directly with customers. Some people prefer to work behind the scenes, so don't try to push them too far out of their comfort zones. The work they're doing is vital to the organization's success.

Discuss which issues generate an us-them response between customer-facing and behind-the-scenes employees.

Develop and provide flexible options to enable employees to meet customer needs

Discuss how the person's direct reports work with customers. When necessary, discuss better ways to handle a situation.

To successfully meet customer needs, employees need to have a variety of options to choose from, as well as the flexibility and latitude to make decisions without having to get permission from management at every turn. Consider the following suggestions for enabling employees to meet customer needs:

- ▶ Work with your team to come up with several different options for meeting key customer needs. Use these options as guidelines for dealing with customers. This information will be especially helpful to new employees.
- ▶ Make sure people know what is and is not negotiable as they try to meet customer needs. Within those boundaries, give them the latitude to make decisions.
- ▶ Reinforce the importance of being flexible in dealing with customers. As a group, talk about the consequences of being inflexible or too focused on procedures.
- ▶ Share success stories with your team. Talk about how being flexible helps your organization meet customer needs and solidify relationships with customers.
- ▶ If people feel uncertain about how to deal with unusual customer needs and requests, encourage them to come to you with questions. Work together to come up with creative solutions.
- ▶ Don't punish people who have made an honest mistake in an attempt to meet customer needs. Recognize the effort and initiative, and help determine a more effective way to handle similar situations in the future.

Create systems and processes that make it easy for customers to do business with your company

Systems and processes can make or break customer relationships. If a customer is handled differently every time he or she interacts with someone from your organization, it will be frustrating and confusing. It will also cause customers to lose confidence in your company's abilities. Consider the following suggestions:

Meet Customer Needs

Challenge people to identify the process that gets the most complaints from customers. Discuss how it could be redesigned and how they would measure the change.

- ▶ Communicate customer requirements and expectations to everyone in your organization whose work reaches the customer. Explain the reasons for the customer's requirements and expectations so that people understand the reasons for any variations from your standard processes.
- ▶ Make sure that new people quickly learn systems and processes for working with customers. Also orient them to each part of your business so they understand how each step affects customers.
- ▶ Set up customer teams in which each person can handle issues and problems for that customer. Make sure each person on the team stays up to date on the latest customer information and has the authority to solve problems.
- ▶ Ensure that systems and processes are designed with the customer in mind. Sometimes organizations create systems that are convenient for them, but actually make things more difficult or confusing for their customers.
- ▶ Before you implement a new system or process, analyze it and be sure there is a payoff in customer experience for each action you take.
- ▶ Work with your colleagues across the organization to compile a list of best practices. Share the information broadly, put it on the intranet, and build the recommendations into your existing systems and procedures.

Understand and address the customer implications of process changes

Very few processes are perfect; most could use a tweak or two, and some obviously need a major overhaul. As you improve and streamline processes at your organization, think about how it will affect your customers. The last thing you want to do is make their lives more difficult. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Make sure you understand the entire chain of events, from salespeople talking to customers to the customer receiving your product or service. Then you will know who to consult about changing a process.
- ▶ Assemble a task force to improve a process that affects customers.

- ▷ Review the purpose of each step in the process.
 - ▷ Reconfigure ineffective steps.
 - ▷ Eliminate unnecessary steps.
 - ▷ Examine the ripple effect of any changes.
 - ▷ Implement the new process.
 - ▷ Follow up to determine if the new process is more effective and more efficient.
- ▶ Do a beta test with select customers before you implement a new process. Give them something for their trouble.
 - ▶ When you propose changes to a process, be able to state tangible benefits to the customer. Don't change something just for the sake of change. You should be able to quantify the difference.
 - ▶ Determine how long it will take to make the change and how difficult it will be to train people on the new procedures. Also consider how you will minimize the impact on customers during the transition.
 - ▶ People may not want to consider how a change will affect the customer because it makes things more complicated. They may be under a time crunch or have a mandate to make a change. As a leader, you need to make sure that they consider all the implications.

Ensure that people are communicating process changes to customers, including the reasons why the change is happening.

Remove barriers so you can provide exceptional customer service

Even people who are committed to providing exceptional customer service may be blocked by organizational or departmental constraints that prohibit them from going the extra mile. Make every attempt to remove the barriers that get in the way of giving your customers top-notch service.

Common barriers and possible solutions include:

- ▶ *Frontline employees perceive that they lack the authority to make decisions to satisfy unhappy customers.* Give frontline employees the authority to do what's right for the customer. If necessary, change or make exceptions to your current policies.

Meet Customer Needs

Encourage people to obtain regular feedback from frontline employees to learn how they would improve customer service.

- ▶ *People are satisfied with the status quo.* Raise your standards. Know and communicate what your competitors are doing. Underscore the role that loyal customers play in your success.
- ▶ *People in your organization believe that you have a corner on the marketplace.* Recognize that today's marketplace is dynamic and competitive. Determine what you can do to go beyond what the competition is doing.
- ▶ *Frontline workers are stressed from a heavy workload and constantly putting out fires.* Examine processes that may need improvement. Aggressively work with management to eliminate the source of problems—the quality issues. Let your front line know that their efforts are valued and respected.
- ▶ *Frontline employees and customers face excess paperwork and red tape.* Streamline your complaint-resolution process. Whenever possible, handle necessary paperwork after the customer leaves or ends the phone call.
- ▶ *Employees are concerned that customers will take advantage of lenient customer service policies or pursue legal recourse for poor performance.* Determine the parameters of a legitimate customer complaint. Teach your employees how to identify and handle legally sensitive issues.