

Title:

Tips for Uncovering "Customer Hassles"

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Summary:

When consumers aren't happy with the quality of their experiences, what will they do? Some people will contact your company to vent their frustrations about what they've been experiencing. But research shows that the vast majority will quietly take their business elsewhere and you might not ever hear why. To help you put a stop to the silent exodus, this article suggests four ways to uncover the causes of "customer hassles."

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Are you wrestling with cranky customers, low-vitality products, congested services, and an aching bottom line? You certainly don't need to. Why exactly does this occur?

One major reason is that consumers expect products and services to work exactly as advertised, in a confusion- and error-free manner. It's easy to understand why these expectations exist because we ourselves are consumers. If given a choice between something that's easy to use and functions correctly, and something that's not easy to use or doesn't function correctly, we'll pick the former every time.

When consumers aren't happy with the quality of their experiences, what will they do? Unless it's a catastrophic situation, will they contact you to tell you about it, so that you'll know how to correct the problem? Perhaps some will, to vent their frustrations about what they've been experiencing. But research shows that the vast majority will quietly take their business elsewhere, and you might not ever hear why. To help you put a stop to the silent exodus, this article suggests four ways to uncover the causes of "customer hassles."

First, Why Do Customer Hassles Occur?

You'd think that any company that provides a product or service would put itself in the shoes of its own customers, and thus provide the very best product or service possible. Unfortunately, that's not always the case, especially if there is not much competition in a certain market. Yet even when product and service providers have the very best of intentions, here's another pervasive problem...

Any products (such as tools, gadgets, or software systems) -- or even services (such as auto repair shops, telephone companies, or transportation businesses) -- can burden consumers by introducing complex requirements of their own.

Those requirements can include queuing time, waiting time, installing or upgrading something, setting things up, programming in some cases (think about your VCR), learning curves, maintenance, wrestling with bugs, troubleshooting, waiting on hold for customer support, and potentially much, much more.

These are all examples of customer headaches of various sizes. When these extra requirements begin adding up, no matter how "good" your product or service might be, hassles can negatively affect your customers' experiences with your offerings. These are just a few characteristics:

-- Hassles can range from something that seems relatively small and only mildly annoying all the way to making the product or service impossible to use for its intended purpose. They can drive customers crazy, or make them feel really angry or stupid.

-- In the worst cases, customer headaches can cause catastrophic ripple effects that affect wider and wider circles of people, circumstances, and/or operations.

-- No bargain-basement pricing can ever compensate for the worst hassles!

What's the Antidote?

In contrast, what would you want to see happen? You'd want to have headache-free offerings that attract loyal customers, right? Good! There's every reason why you would want that.

Customer retention research shows that once companies have loyal customers, the cost of keeping them is just one-fifth the cost of attracting new ones. Research also shows that companies can boost their bottom-line results up to 100% just from increasing customer loyalty by only 5%!

So to attract loyal customers, we certainly must remove headaches, and we should

strive to create consistently pleasant experiences with all interactions customers have. The interactions can include visiting a Web site or storefront, asking for more information, purchasing something, receiving order shipments, interacting with the products or services themselves, using any training and documentation, contacting customer service, and so on. Note that an unpleasant experience anywhere along the way could destroy a customer's positive perceptions of all other interactions!

Tips for Uncovering Customer Headaches

So, let's discuss how you can reveal the sources of your customers' aggravations. Below are four tips for exposing this critical information:

1. Poll customers using Web, mail, or e-mail surveys, or support calls.

You might ask what your customers love and don't love about your products and services, and how they might suggest improving them. You could even consider expanding routine customer support calls by asking customers: "Is there anything you can think of that could enable our products or services to better assist you?" Customers may find it very refreshing to finally reveal their pet peeves.

2. Comb your technical support logs to locate hassles of every type.

What's really been bugging your customers or stopping them from getting something done? See which kinds of trends you can spot. For example, are people calling technical support mainly to get training on using the system? Are they having problems installing, setting up, or getting going? Are they reporting bugs? Are the instructions incomplete or confusing? Another way of looking at this is to ask why your system is not completely transparent in helping customers to accomplish their real goals.

3. Observe your customers using your products at their own facilities.

It may be a real eye-opener to watch your customers try to install, set up, learn, and troubleshoot your product without having someone guide them through every step. If you had intended your products to be self-explaining and easy to use, this could reveal several aspects in which they are not.

4. Prioritize your findings using the 80:20 rule.

Try to determine which 20% of the hassles (the "vital few") seem to be giving your customers 80% of the grief. Then, continuously work toward eliminating the heaviest hitters until you've removed everything down to the noise level. It's

easier said than done, but in the long run, your customers will really appreciate it!

In conclusion, revealing and remedying annoying hassles can stem the exodus of cranky customers and help you begin building a base of "raving fans." Your customers deserve no less than the very best of experiences with every facet of your offerings.