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More than a feeling: measuring customer emotions

Sending out a token feedback form once a year won't cut it if you want an honest opinion of how customers think they're being treated by your firm. So how can you gauge what they really feel? Louise Druce gets to the heart of measuring consumer emotions.

By Louise Druce, features editor



Unless they're ranting and raving down the phone or lavishing praise on a blog site, it's hard to tell what customers really feel about the service you provide.

They may tick the 'satisfied' boxes on feedback questionnaires but what does that really tell you – they don't like to complain or that they're quietly happy? By tapping into customer emotions, businesses can transform service levels from good to outstanding as they better understand what their customers have to go through to get what they want.

You'll be pleased to know this doesn't involve deploying Jeremy Kyle-styled frontline staff to hear full client catharses. The emphasis is on getting real-time snapshots of different experiences. For example, consumer website sutori.co.uk provides a speaking platform for negative and positive customer experiences. It also allows users to rate the company on a 'goodwill metre' that ranges in scale from 'I'm in love' to 'I'm livid with rage'.

"Customers now have more opportunity than ever before to influence each other's feelings towards brands and products," says Gurval Caer, president and CEO of site creator Blast Radius. "The brand perception of many can be shifted by the shared experience of few. This means most brand owners need to work on their listening skills."

Defining the relationship

Internet service provider PlusNet has also recently launched a web-based community site, amalgamating the forums of different brands through which it sells broadband access that were previously hidden behind password protected areas. To add credibility to the comments posted on the site – good or bad – it chose to employ independent moderators. It also uses the site to test and get feedback on new product ideas, as well as listening to suggestions from customers.

"You get a much closer understanding of what the customer really wants on both ends of the emotional spectrum," says PlusNet products director Neil Armstrong. "If the customer is hopping mad you know there is a serious problem with the product or service and getting to the bottom of it is key to if that relationship to continue."

"Customers now have more opportunity than ever before to influence each other's feelings towards brands and products." Gurval Caer, president and CEO, Blast Radius

Equally, customers have been using the site to either praise the products or help others with problem-solving. It, too, has a rating mechanism that surveys customers on everything from customer service to value for money.

PlusNet has plans to add more features to the site, such as blogs, bookmarks, links and photos, and will be publishing a roadmap of the plans so that users can vote on them. "You have to have real engagement," Armstrong emphasises. "There are companies out there trying to jump on the bandwagon of getting in Second Life or Facebook, but if you're going to engage with customers and get some emotive feedback on your services, you have to give something back – it's a two-way dialogue."

He alerts other companies to the dangers of being more open and transparent, namely that there is nowhere to hide when customers can see everything, good and bad, about you. "You have to be very genuine in your intent," he adds. "Customers are very savvy and cynical. If they feel you are trying to sell or market something to them, you can get a very negative reaction."

Armstrong cites the example of company employees blogging positive messages about the brand under a pseudonym. He says companies should be more upfront. "If you identify yourself as an employee right from the beginning, it makes it clear in what context you are speaking from without ever trying to deceive. Customers will respect you more."

Insider information

Another medium for measuring customer emotions gaining more credibility, especially in retail, is the mystery shopper. Jeremy Michael, commercial director of customer development provider Retail Eyes, which specialises in this area, freely admits that in the past the concept was seen as a bit of a 'jolly' for the shopper. However, his company are helping to rebuild its reputation by enforcing rigorous recruitment and reviewing processes, and employing a small team of people who already have a background in the sector they are working in.

The recruits themselves also have to be genuine customers. For example, a visitor to its bookmaker client, William Hill, would need to have knowledge of betting shops or they would be too conspicuous.

"It's really great for the frontline staff to receive feedback from a genuine customer rather than from an inspector or auditor. It's more credible," Michael says. "Reports are often used for rewards and incentives, so people doing the visits need to understand how serious it is."

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Retail Eyes is currently gaining around 200 recruits per week. Initial applications are made through the website and judged on criteria such as spelling and grammar, and the applicants understanding of the concept of mystery shopping. Around one in four will be rejected at this stage. Successful candidates will then fill out another application

to garner more personal details and assess their compatibility with a client before being sent out on a probationary visit.

Once this is complete, shoppers are graded on four key criteria: spelling and grammar, accuracy of information (did they go to the right outlet at the right time etc.), quality of comments, and how quickly they respond and get the information onto the system. The information itself is proofed overnight by a team in California and is then made instantly available to the client.

"Mystery visits used to be black and white, with head office setting questions very much based on operational brand standards. For example, were there 18 slices of pepperoni on the pizza, were the windows clean, were the right posters displayed?" Michael explains. "Very often the scores didn't match up with the experience. You could go to a pub and have a lovely time and find the staff really friendly but the questions talked about carpets and lightbulbs."

All-round knock-on effect

Another example he mentions is booking conference facilities at hotels. Staff are trained to give a lot of information, and deal with that side of things well. However, it is often delivered in a fast, robotic way that makes the customer lose interest very quickly.

"We are focussing on what the customer feels and why they may or may not return to your shop or restaurant," Michael adds. "You get objective, constructive feedback, in detail, on all elements of the experience. It's about balancing brand standard and customer service."

The flexibility of the scheme means mystery shoppers can also make visits frequently and outside of peak hours to element the possibility of a 'bad day' and to make sure service is consistent.

"It's all about understanding what it's really like to be a customer in your outlet and being able to motivate frontline staff to deliver a really great service," says Michael. "If customers get a better service, they are more likely to recommend you and spend more in the shop as well. It's an all-round knock-on effect."

Quick Q&A

LCM PR and Marketing's customers were surveyed about their emotional reactions to critical touch-points with the firm. Managing director Lizz Clarke discusses the findings:

LD: What interesting statistics came out of the survey?

LC: We expected more of a kicking! The most important was customers wanted to feel more confidence in us at all levels, not just from senior staff. That showed us there was more delegation and coaching to be done.

LD: Why is measuring customer emotions so important?

LC: When it comes to service levels, our clients do not base judgements on the facts but on how they're feeling. We call one client at least twice a day and email her dozens of times and she measured us down on confidence levels. Another client who hardly ever gets a call because he prefers email measured us at the top.

LD: What did you find beneficial from the survey?

LC: Learning that customers want to feel more confidence in the staff and that hearing from us regularly is a big factor in this. Now, everything we do is characterised by finding ways to make clients feel confidence in us. Much of our learning and development is focused on emotional intelligence to enable us to respond positively and objectively to client scenarios.

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[Matt Hawksworth](#) 29-Aug-2007 @ 14:01PM

B2B Application

I run a company that specializes in measuring and improving the emotional customer experience across all major touchpoints. We work in both B2B and B2C environments and notice there is a tendency to think of emotional experience as something 'fluffy' and more consumer relevant. Our research shows that although the practical approach may (or may not) be different in B2B and B2C relationships, the emotional fundamentals remain the same – there are, after all, human beings behind each interaction! "In the hard nosed, fast paced business world people just want results" paraphrases what we often hear from service personnel in B2B environments. This often leads to senior B2B service managers driving what they consider to be a 'professional' service approach, which itself can be a turn off, as highlighted in the conference facilities example in the article above.

'Business' is no less a relationship than 'consumer' and all relationships involve emotions...



[Charlotte Whewell](#) 28-Aug-2007 @ 13:23PM

Does it apply to B2B?

I work in B2B and am developing an interest in customer experience. Many of the examples however tend to be B2C - does anyone have any research/information regarding B2B?

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