PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS

Specializing in helping organizations:

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Nice (Yawn….) Talking to You

During a break at a conference, a woman named Marge told me about an experience she had recently had at another conference. It seems that she'd been talking to the keynote speaker when he abruptly turned away and started talking to someone else. I asked if he had cut her off in midsentence. No, she admitted. She had finished what she was saying, but was about to say something else when he rudely turned away.

Marge sounded deeply offended at the way she'd been treated. In her view, the speaker wasn't interested in her ideas and couldn't be bothered with her. Could it be, I asked, that his apparent rudeness had been unintentional and that he'd offer a heartfelt apology if he knew of her reaction? She said she didn't care; he was in the public eye and should know better.

> **CLIENT RELATIONS**

Marge's reaction got me thinking about the ease of causing offense in a different context: when working with customers. How often do we make a comment, use a phrase, glance a certain way, or do something seemingly innocuous, and in the process unintentionally offend a customer?

Let us (wide-eyed . . .) count the ways

With Marge's reaction in mind, I asked participants in my next several Managing Customer Expectations seminars if they could think of situations in which an inadvertent word or action might offend customers.

Their response: Indeed, yes. How? On the phone, by sounding unenthusiastic or bored or distracted. In a class, by flipping through notes while someone is asking a question. At a customer gathering, by looking at your watch while a customer is speaking to you. Or by looking around the room (particularly in the direction of the exit!). Or by not waiting that extra fraction of a second after the customer finishes speaking before turning away, as though you can't wait to escape.

If your responsibilities involve customer service and support, your customers may hold you to a higher standard just as Marge held the speaker, and they may think that you too should know better. Therefore, it's wise to reflect on the impact you might have on them, and to be sensitive to their reactions to your words and actions. You don't have to go to extremes and worry about whether every syllable or blink or nod might cause offense. Just be mindful of your behavior, and you'll be less likely to allow a careless word or action to create negative perceptions.

Having given a keynote presentation just a few hours before my conversation with Marge, I took great pains to remain enthusiastic and wide-eyed, while letting her fully and completely have her say. Then I smiled my biggest smile, told her how much I enjoyed speaking with her, and carefully — very carefully — took my leave.

FEEDBACK GATHERING

Five Frequent Feedback Flaws

If organizations really want customer feedback, why do they make it so difficult for customers to provide that feedback? Here are some examples of common flaws and how to avoid them:

1. Requesting feedback about the wrong attributes. At a hotel I once stayed at, I was satisfied with all the items listed on the feedback form in my room: quick check-in, clean room, and so on. However, the peephole in the door was over my head. *Way* over my head. When you're my height, such things are important. How am I to follow the hotel's advice to look out the peephole before opening the door to visitors if I can't *reach* the peephole?

Customers can give top ratings to the attributes *you* consider important and still be dissatisfied because you've fallen short on the attributes *they* consider important. If you want satisfied customers, find out what *they* consider important, and invite them to rate your service on those attributes.

2. **No space for feedback.** In addition to asking customers to rate the items listed, many feedback forms invite customers to add their comments. Some of these forms provide plenty of space for comments — provided customers write in a one-point typesize!

A request for customer comments is a key element of a well-designed feedback form. Given lots of blank space, customers often provide extensive amounts of high-quality commentary. However, it's pointless to request comments and then not provide space for them.

3. No time to think about feedback. I got a call from an office supply store I often shop at. The caller said he was conducting a survey, and asked what I liked and didn't like about his store. I told him I could give him better feedback if I had some time to think about it, and asked him to call back the next day. He said he would, but he didn't. I guess he wanted feedback only from those who'd provide it on the spot.

Some people can instantaneously retrieve information from their mental databases. Other people prefer time to cogitate. Whatever method you use to solicit feedback, give customers ample time to reflect on your questions. The quality of feedback you get is likely to be worth the extra time.

4. Inconveniencing customers. One of my favorite feedback forms is from a restaurant whose form is a postcard that requests responses to several questions. The instructions on the postcard state how important the feedback is — followed by the reminder: "Don't forget to affix a stamp before mailing." Instead of returning the postcard, I saved it and now offer it into evidence as Exhibit A in my presentations on feedback gathering.

Few enough people fill out feedback forms to begin with; most won't bother if they have to pay for the privilege of doing so. To maximize the amount and quality of feedback you receive, make it as easy as possible for customers to respond. If you ask dissatisfied customers to inconvenience themselves to inform you of their complaints, you've just given them one more thing to complain about!

5. Not responding to feed- feedback as promised. I received a mail survey from a furniture store shortly after making a purchase there. One item in the survey asked if I had any complaints. I did, and used the space provided to elaborate. Another item asked if I'd like someone to contact me about my complaints. I checked the "yes" box. It's been about four years now, but I'm waiting patiently.

It's a measure of sophisticated service to offer to contact customers about their grievances. Doing so tells customers that you value their feedback and want to set things right, and this evidence of concern can keep customers who might otherwise take their business elsewhere. But by not calling me as promised, this furniture store fell lower in my estimation than if no such promise had been made. Don't offer to contact disgruntled customers unless you really mean to do so.

As for me, I'm still waiting.

Feedback Form

We value your feedback. Please write your comments in the box below.
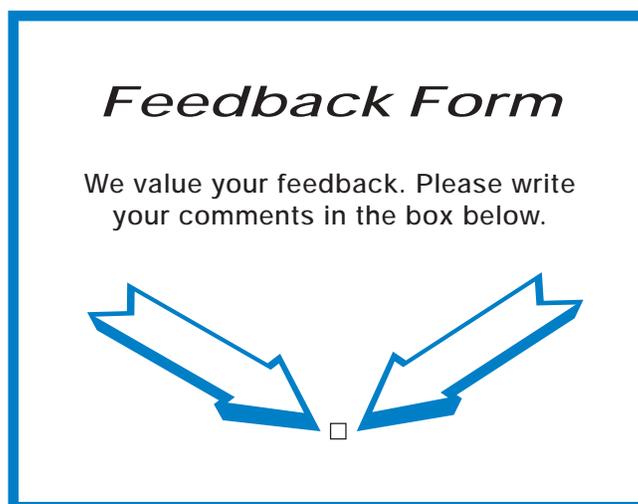
SERVICE STRATEGIES

What Are Your Measurements?

That which is measured is managed, provided of course that those measurements are also analyzed, interpreted, documented, reported, and acted on. For example, if you weigh yourself regularly, you can make an informed decision about whether to cut back on donuts or cheese-cake or cholesterol surprise. You can choose to switch to low-calorie alternatives. And you can gauge how often you can pig out (a technical term for a way to increase your storage capacity).

Of course, some things can be managed even without being directly measured. If you overdo the donuts, eventually the consequences will become apparent. You won't need a scale to recognize the bulging truth, or a mirror, or a mean-spirited colleague. Your attempts to buckle your belt over your billowing bulge will tell you all you need to know.

But why avoid taking measurements if they'll help you trap a potential problem? If you take regular measurements, the fact that something is taking too long, exceeding an acceptable limit, or failing to have the desired impact is much less likely to elude you— provided, of course, that you're measuring the right things.

Take training, for example. If you're a trainer, then you probably track such things as the number of classes you offer and number of people who attend. These measures help to demon-strate that you're keep-ing busy with the tough task of teaching. Unfor-tunately, though, they reveal little about the business impact of that training. Yet few trainers do any systematic follow-up to gauge the effectiveness of their efforts.

If that's your situation, then for all you know, students may view your courses as the "anything" in "Anything's

better than my regular work." Unless you do some sort of measuring, you can't say for sure.

Measuring needn't be time-consuming or complex. In fact, the simpler, the better. For example, if you make just a few quick phone calls a month after each class, you may discover that most students haven't yet used what they learned, or that management won't give them time to practice what they learned, or that they've tried to apply the course material, but got stuck. And with that kind of information, you can do some managing.

Similar concerns apply to the delivery of support services. Groups that provide technical or product support collect an amazing array of statistics, much of which is automatically generated by ex-pensive look-ma-no-hands call tracking and problem manage-ment software.

But if you are a support specialist, do you regularly review this staggering set of statistics as a basis for assess-ing your service effectiveness? Do you ever analyze the data to identify which customers have made the most calls, how many calls are for the same old problems, and which problems have taken the longest to resolve?

Even 15 minutes a day devoted to identifying, tracking or evaluating appro-priate indicators is better than none at all. This is especially true if the absence of such information is leading you to do more and more of what you shouldn't really be doing in the first place.

Next time someone asks you what your measurements are, you'll understand it's a question about your professional competence, not your waistline. Unless, of course, it's from a colleague who's noticed you've been overdoing the donuts.
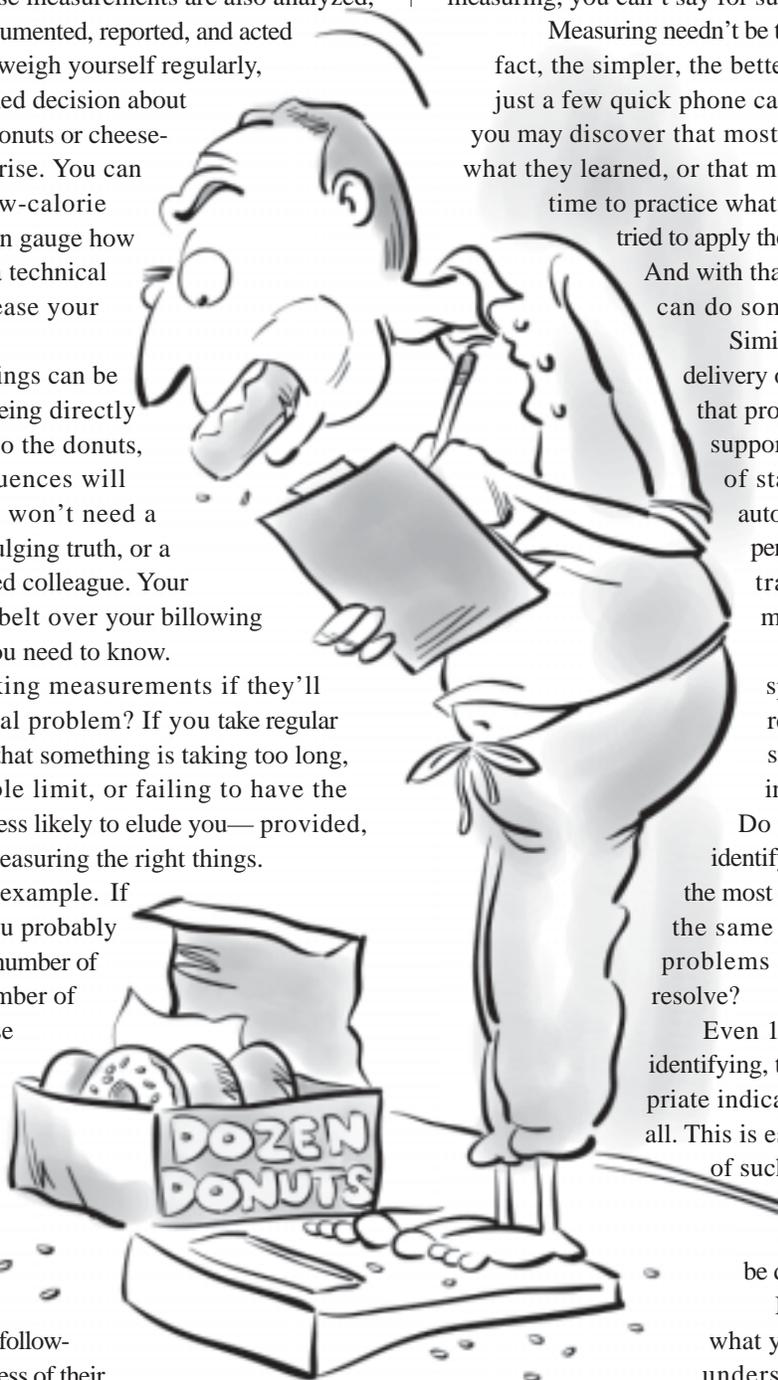
PROJECT MANAGEMENT

10 Ways to Guarantee Project Failure

Imagine that you've been put in charge of a mighty important project. Imagine further that you're allergic to success and will do anything to avoid it. What can you do to ensure that the project doesn't just fail, but (just to be safe) fails miserably? Here are ten suggestions:

1. Abbreviate the planning process. Planning is boring. It takes too long, and diverts attention from doing real work. Besides, there's nothing to show for it, so name the project, sketch some squiggles on a scratch pad, and get going. There's no need to strategize every little detail. Everything will fall into place in its own time.

2. Don't ask "what if?" What if we have staff turnover during the project? What if some anticipated business changes actually come to pass? What if the other groups on our critical path perceive priorities differently from the way we do? Hypothetical possibilities are great for hypothetical projects, but this project is real. Just focus on the here and now, and you'll be fine.

3. Minimize customer involvement. Customers just slow things down. Anyway, they don't know what they want, so why bother asking them? Do your best to avoid customer input, and don't waste time with customers clarifying project direction, scope and expectations. You can't afford such trivial pursuits when you've got a deadline to meet.

4. Select team members by the hey-you method. It doesn't really matter who is on the project team. If the people you initially assign prove too slow, you can always add more. Don't worry about the learning curve; they can teach each other. If progress is still too slow, reorganize the team and watch energy levels soar.

5. Work people long and hard. People who work a normal work-week aren't invested in the project. Anyway, people who work weekends get out of mowing the lawn, chauffeuring the kids, and entertaining the in-laws. There's something wrong with a deadline if people can meet it without any overtime.

6. Don't inform management of problems. Managers have better things to do than be concerned with what and how you're doing. If you're going to bother them with a problem, wait till it's a real doozie. Then spring it on them. Don't worry, they can handle it. After all, that's what management is paid for.

7. Allow changes at any point. The more changes, the better. Accepting all requests for changes keeps things lively and avoids the monotony of a static project. Maintain a you-want-it-you-got-it philosophy. It does wonders for customer morale and keeps project personnel on their toes. And don't bother documenting these changes. They'll all be part of one big end result, so why bother?

8. Discourage questions from team members. They don't have to understand what they're doing; that's your concern. And they certainly don't need to understand what anyone else is doing. Above all, don't explain the instructions and directions you give them. Their job is to do, not to think. You're not a seasoned project manager until you can glibly tell people what to do without telling them why.

9. Don't give customers progress reports. If they ask, just tell them the project is proceeding smoothly. Explain patiently that status reports are counterproductive; you could be using the time to work on the project. Tell them anything; just get them off your back. This is the trust-me approach to project management. Customers will appreciate the confidence you exhibit.

10. Don't compare project progress with project estimates. That way, you won't have to deal with the discovery that the project is slipping. Anyway, the sooner you fall behind, the more time you have to catch up. But you already knew that.

Failure guaranteed or . . .

As a rule of thumb, remember that if you pay attention to the needs of the project, the team, and your customers, you run the risk of succeeding. Heed the above, and failure is yours. Guaranteed!