

## 'With' Trumps 'For'

Make the customer a partner.



by Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU LOOKED AT a product and thought, "I wish I'd thought of that?" Today's winning organizations—the ones with the endearing and enduring products and services, design them *with* customers rather than *for* customers. The *for* group creates a product or service and then conducts market research, including focus groups to get customers' reactions for refinement: "I prefer the blue one over the green one" The customer is viewed as a judge not as a partner.

The *with* group views and treats customers as true partners in the product or service life cycle. Their work starts with customers, learns their hopes, habits, and aspirations, and then goes to work designing. They spend time trying to get in the mind of customers—thinking deeply about the product or service through their customers' lives. They go to school on customers before beginning, include customers at early drawing board stages, get reactions to product or service variations, and keep customers posted on progress from idea to implementation. They ask customers for advice on tough decisions.

How could you improve on a product as simple and pedestrian as a baby bottle? Playtex, Evenflo, Similac and Dr. Brown's and ThinkBaby have all tweaked the 100-year-old design with better nipples, easier handles, and ways to minimize air intake. But, inventor-entrepreneur Jason Tebeau created a hands-free bottle that left baby independent during feeding time.

It all started when Tebeau's mom asked him, "How do you feed a baby while in a car seat or stroller?" His inventive brain went to work thinking through the mind of the user. Assembling a group of 40 to 50 babies with parent in tow, Tebeau observed babies interacting with bottles in various stages of the design process as he solved assorted product challenges.

The end result was the wildly popular *Pacifeeder*, one of several products from Tebeau's company Savi Baby®. The bottle has been so popular that

many older babies prefer it over the "lay in mommy's lap" variety. The customer—babies and their parents—were intimately involved. Tebeau even used parents to help determine the appropriate price for his creative product, knowing retailers could see it as "just another baby bottle."

As customers, we're often told that we are *important* and *valued*. Yet, this is often just PR noise and ad taglines. Customers know *actions speak louder than words*; tangible evidence of worth lies in what you *do*, not in what you *say*. Think of the double message a customer gets when a call ends up with a recorded message "your call is *very important* to us" followed by a 30-minute hold to speak to a live operator. Customers as partners means finding ways to *treat customers as valued*.

*Customer care when they share. By*

including customers, you offer them a type of *customer sweat equity* with great economic return. When customers feel like partners, their loyalty is elevated. Xerox found their highly loyal customers had a repurchase rate *six times* that of customers who rated their service and products as "satisfactory." Loyal customers stay longer, spend more, forgive more, advocate more, and are easier and cheaper to serve.

Whether tangible product or intangible service, imbedding the customer into the DNA insures its relevance and acceptance. Don't treat your customers as passengers on your road to success—let them help you drive! **SSE**

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**ACTION: Make your customers real partners.**

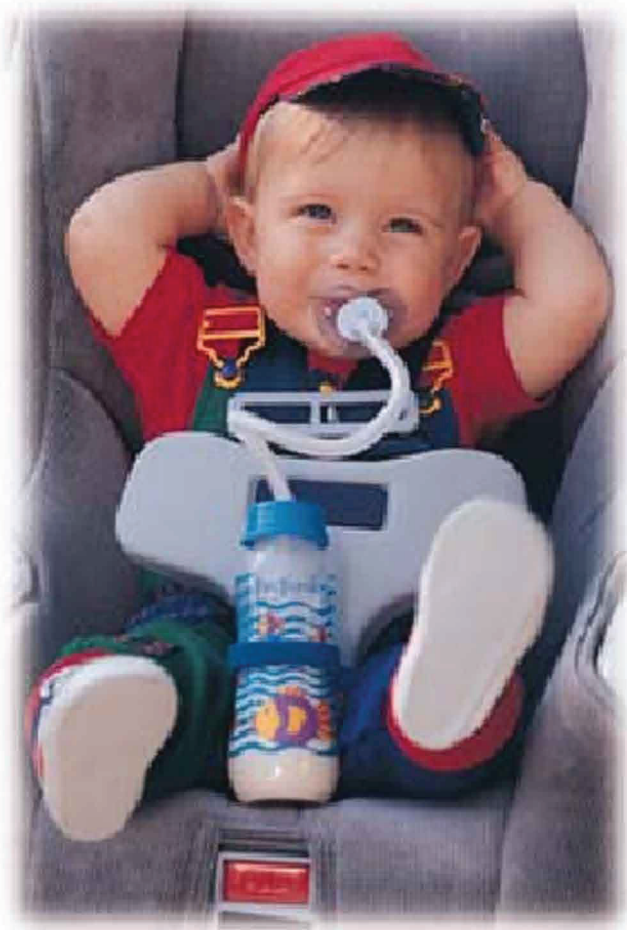


Photo courtesy of Savi Baby®