

Don't Skip Dessert



BY CHIP R. BELL AND JOHN R. PATTERSON

Dessert has gotten a bad rap. In our pursuit of a skinny derriere, the mantra of most restaurant patrons has become, “No thanks, we’ll skip dessert. Just bring the check”. Calorie counting has won over palette pleasing. The richest part of the meal is now becoming an ignored footnote in culinary history.

Customer service survey application has gotten a similar rap. In our hasty pursuit of the next initiative, we forget to mine the intelligence

nuggets gained. We too often fail to make the “application of data learnings” as valued as the “acquisition of data.” Checking the box that we “performed another survey” has won over making the process meaningful. The richest part of the survey effort is overlooked and left behind.

The history of “dessert” is varied. Its delicious history cut across countless cultures and customs. Dessert is a way to thank a guest for sharing a meal. Dessert also has a future-focus, a special ending so that guests will want to return.

In some cultures, dessert is a tool for balancing the entree—with an appetizer on one end and a dessert on the other – these bookends give the chef a way to gauge how to prepare and present the entree or main event. Who can forget dessert as a chance for the too-full guest to have a special treat to take home? What an abundant heritage dieters miss with their insistence on bypassing dessert! It is like stopping a meal rather than ending it.

The follow-up to a customer survey also risks having the same

susceptibility of being skipped. There is the typical excitement at the start of most customer intelligence efforts as well as apprehension for the results. Organizations can get so immersed in reviewing the survey data and/or so distraught with the customers' perceptions that they fail to implement a plan to respond quickly to what customers have reported. Skipping the action phase risks alienating employees and customers.

Here are four ways to enhance the richness of the survey process:

1. Just as dessert is a way to thank a guest for sharing a special meal, follow up to a customer survey should be a way to thank customers for sharing their educational feedback.

“For dessert we have...” or “I’m sure you have room for dessert” are lines declaring an upcoming special treat. It is not accidental that in Europe the word dessert is replaced with the word “sweet.” Consider the many meanings of “sweet”—kind, pleasant, satisfying, harmonious – all affirmation words. Like dessert, a customer survey can be a way to affirm and acknowledge the value of the customers’ candor.

Every successful customer intelligence effort requires the cooperation of your customers. You are asking them to invest time, energy and knowledge in helping you gain a deeper understanding of their business needs, aspirations and dreams. If future feedback from customers is needed, it is important to thank them for their participation. Simply undertaking a customer intelligence effort creates an expectation in customers’ minds that their feedback will be put to good use.

Shortly after receiving the results of the customer survey, formally

communicate with all the customers who participated in the survey. This formal communication should come from the CEO or President and should include the following:

- Expression of gratitude to those who participated for their investment of time, energy and for their candid responses.
- Explanation to customers what process will be used for communicating the results of the survey to the entire organization.
- Underscore to customers that the company has reemphasized its commitment to improving customer satisfaction and established customer loyalty as one of its major priorities.
- Provide a brief overview of your plan to institute change based on the results of the customer intelligence effort with an outlined timeframe of implemented changes.
- Communicate the plan and timeframe for the next customer intelligence effort and alert customers that their participation will again be sought to gauge the impact of the change initiative.

A formal communication is one of the first steps in what should become a formal customer communications plan. Since customers’ interests and expectations for the organization have been raised, don’t let them hang down in the communications arena. It is like dessert, because a follow-up affirms your gratitude.

2. Dessert also has a future-focus. The aftermath of a customer survey effort is to show that it will lead to future actions.

Who can forget the challenge of waiting for dessert or the use of the forthcoming dessert as a reward for eating all your peas? Because dessert is always deemed special and always arrives after the entrée, it holds a special prominence as something

provoking joyful expectation of a treat worth waiting for. Customer survey efforts should hold a similar reputation.

A customer survey effort raises expectations of action on the company’s part from customers, management and employees. Once the senior team has developed an in-depth understanding from the results of the surveys, develop an action plan to communicate the information throughout the organization and to address the top good and bad issues raised by customers. Immediately assign responsibility for implementation and develop a timeline to completion.

One of the major pitfalls often encountered by companies in this action planning process is taking on too much too soon. The expectations of all of the involved constituencies are to see meaningful change implemented in a timely manner by the company. This does not mean trying to fix everything tomorrow! Focus on the top three to five service quality features in terms of importance as reported by customers. Also, look for evidence of trust and integrity issues and address these as quickly as possible. A company tagged with a reputation for being less than trustworthy requires a Herculean effort to change that reputation to avoid rapid customer defections. Warn all constituents, including the boards of directors, to expect a slight decrease in customer satisfaction immediately after new processes and procedures are implemented. Effective change requires patience as employees get more comfortable with the new way of doing business.

Involve a broad spectrum of employees in the action planning and implementation effort. Insure that there is solid accountability for planning and implementing on what can be a very difficult culture change. Appoint a cadre of respected “service champions” to act as consultant, conscience and cajoler to help keep the action planning process moving forward. Create an ongoing effort to

survey customers. If surveys are done periodically and make a difference in terms of improvement, employees will come to look forward to improvement data that can enhance their service performance.

Over communicate all of the news (good and bad) regarding the survey and the organization's action plan to the entire company. Often, executive management tries to shroud the results of a customer survey in secrecy. Some fear bad news will impact morale. Others worry someone might call up customers to find out why they provided certain feedback, which is actually a good thing. If the results of the survey are broadly communicated, employees are more trustful, expectations are more precise and a future focus toward improvement becomes the norm.

3. Dessert can be a tool for balancing the entrée to gauge how to present the main event. Customer survey results can help align the service vision, corporate standards and behavior norms.

Great chefs start meal planning with the main course. However, both the accessorizing and presentation of the chosen entrée is done from the perspective of both the appetizer and the dessert. A scrumptious dessert might suggest an entrée without a demi glaze plum sauce, or a light fruit based dessert might be especially appealing after a super rich grouper or fillet entree. Customer survey results can perform a similar balancing role providing evidence that the service vision is being executed, which pleases both employees and

customers.

There are always customers who call a company and make an effort to tell them what they dislike about the organization, such as process, procedures, decisions, policies, etc. Awareness of this disconnect provides an ideal opportunity to reexamine and reaffirm the company's service vision, corporate standards and behavioral norms. If there is inadequate alignment with what customers value most, it is time to devise and execute an action and communication plan.

If the organization has no service vision, the new customer feedback provides a platform on which to craft one. A service vision should communicate your precise customer focus, identify how your organization will be unique and distinguished in the



eyes of customers, provide a tool for aligning energy and effort so customers enjoy consistency and reliability and serve as a grounding for service standards, measures and practices.

Employees and customers are expecting change based on what is learned from the customer intelligence effort. If the organization continues to operate based on standards, norms and/or a service vision at odds with the most recent

customer feedback, everyone, including customers, will realize the chances for success are minimal. Such non-alignment is likely to create a trust and integrity issue for the organization with all its stakeholders.

4. Dessert can be a chance for a full guest to have a special treat to take home. Customer service survey results can be a means to make performance management and compensation systems align individuals and units with the best customer service performance.

Graciousness is the preferred attitude to ensure that the delightfully full guests return for another meal. Customer service survey results have powerful take-home potential if they are hard wired into the organization's infrastructure.

Customer intelligence is not about learning the knowledge from the surveys, it is about taking that knowledge and changing your company. Survey results are about customers' expectations and experiences so that future organizational performance can be effectively aligned with present customer assessment. Only through the effective integration of insight with output can the knowledge be gained extendedly beyond a knee-jerk reaction to a momentary snapshot. Integration requires "taking the data home."

Revise all employees' performance objectives to reflect customer

intelligence information.

Communicate a six, 12 and 18-month target for improvement of overall customer satisfaction. This tells an employee that “getting better” is a priority, particularly if overall customer satisfaction becomes a key factor in performance management and compensation. Announce changes in the compensation system, but make the effective date after the organization has had a chance to implement change. Include a “practice period” to track results on two levels; under the current plan and as if the new plan was in place. Revise recruiting, hiring, training and performance criteria to reflect what customers say is important.

Even though skinny is definitely “in,” it is important to avoid letting the richest part of the meal become an ignored footnote in culinary

history. An effective customer service survey with an intelligent and timely follow up program can produce a large number of relevant improvement opportunities. Avoid the temptation of failing to make the “application of customer data learnings” as valued as the “acquisition of customer data.” Simply checking the box that we “did another survey” should never win over making the process productive, meaningful...and delicious! ■



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