



RESPONSIVENESS, FOCUS, OR OBSESSION? By Lori L. Silverman

Customer responsiveness. Customer focus. Customer obsession. Which one is the most important of the three? What if I told you that none of them is most important? From my perspective, all three of them are critical to running a business and to achieving customer satisfaction and delight.

So what do they mean? And why are they important to your organization?

CUSTOMER RESPONSIVENESS AND CUSTOMER FOCUS

Customer responsiveness is giving customers what they contract to receive—nothing more, nothing less. This contract may be a verbal or “handshake” agreement or it may actually be in writing, such as a quote for services to be rendered on a particular date. Customer focus is more proactive than customer responsiveness. It involves working with customers to find better ways to meet their needs. It goes beyond the expressed needs and wants of the customer to uncover the underlying purpose behind the customer requirement. For example, a customer may ask you to use a particular coating on glass. But you know that it will not work as well as another product given what the customer plans to do with the glass. Sometimes the best way to serve a customer’s needs is to suggest other options. It may be that another product could serve the original purpose and need better than the originally requested item.

CUSTOMER OBSESSION

Both customer responsiveness—responding reactively by conforming to customer requirements—and customer focus proactively answering customers’ requirements by going beyond expressed wants and needs to uncover the underlying

purpose behind their requirements in order to find better ways to meet them—are not sufficient by themselves. What is also needed is to be out in front of the marketplace. That is what customer obsession is all about. Organizations must anticipate what will bring value to their customers (some of whom may not even be known today) by uncovering and addressing their unknown wants and needs.

For example, what problems do your customers have today relative to your industry’s products and services that still have not been fully solved? These are wonderful sources of unknown wants and needs. Once uncovered, these unknown wants and needs must then be translated into innovative products and services. Your organization is in a better position to determine what would be innovative to your customer because it hears all the issues that multiple customers have and it regularly works with the products and services that are offered to them.

Once your organization interprets this information, it has access to business trends, common customer problems, and information on how competitors handle the same problems and issues you and your customers are faced with. This information is critical to the creation of new products and services that solve an existing problem or anticipate a future need in the marketplace—long before the customer asks for them.

WHY ALL ARE IMPORTANT

Being responsive to customers is the baseline of all interactions with them. This serves as the starting point. If your organization cannot deliver on its promises, then customers will look elsewhere. Focusing on customer needs and wants takes the relationship one step further. It shows that your organization understands its business and its customers’ situations to the extent that it can suggest options that are better, cheaper and/or faster. To survive into the future, your organization must become obsessed with uncovering unknown wants and needs and innovating in these areas. So, assess your organization today. How well is it doing in each of these three areas? What does it need to improve? Now is the time to begin!

Article appeared in the December 2000 issue (Vol. 5, No. 2) of *The Australasian Powder Coater Painter-Fabricator*. All uses, including reprints, require advance permission from the author.

Lori L. Silverman is the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations achieve and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage. She is also the co-author of *Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance* and *Stories Trainers Tell: 55 Ready-to-Use Stories to Make Training Stick*. Lori can be reached by e-mail at lori@partnersforprogress.com.

For additional free articles, check out www.partnersforprogress.com and www.sayitwithastory.com.