

DON'T FORGET THE VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER

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THE
DISTRIBUTION
TEAM

In the past few months, we have all had to make adjustments to our lives. We wear masks, we shelter in place and we homeschool our children. In our professional lives, we learned to communicate through our screens and gave up our reliance on air travel and hotel rooms. It was uncomfortable and awkward in the beginning, but our adaptation skills improved and we have found a way to move forward. Let's face it, we didn't really have a choice.

In the distribution world, we have seen adjustments to the way we fulfill customer orders. Distancing and no-contact seem to be the guiding directives in our new reality. Rather than welcoming customers into showrooms and retail outlets, we are asking them to review our online offering and we will meet you at the door. Some chose to operate as they always had in defiance of the edicts and pollical soundbites. Again, we learned to adapt to our environment. This is one of the many things I love about my chosen niche in distribution. Privately held distributors will find a way. We fight for our place at the table. We survive and, in many cases, thrive.

With these newfound protocols and restrictions, many organizations have implemented new services and interaction methodologies geared toward being that channel of choice for the industry they serve. As we see the lessening of these restrictions and a shift back to an altered normal, what services and changes are going to stick? Will we continue to invest in technologies that maintain the distance? Your crystal ball is as good as mine. As we sit in our virtual conference rooms pondering our value proposition in the future, have

we forgotten to ask the most valuable voice in the room? When plotting our course, are we asking the customer what they want us to do going forward?

In my practice, I have the good fortune of interacting with many different business managers and thought leaders on a weekly basis. The diversity of roles allows me to hear many different sides of a similar challenge. In a recent discussion with a client, who has been particularly hard hit over the past six months, we talked about pivoting the business to a new sales strategy. As entrepreneurs are apt to do, we were off to the races. Pulling scenarios and data points from places unknown, we searched for the perfect recipe of investment, talent and technique. Suddenly, like a frigid bucket of water over the head, we were struck with the realization that the customer voice was not present in our battle plan. Does the customer even want us to approach them in this way?

Like many of you, my website has been in dire need of a refresh for several years. Last year, I made the investment and began the process. I worked with designers and coders to come up with a beautiful offering based on my preferences and aesthetic. It isn't quite done yet, as I am dragging my feet a bit; but after speaking with my client last week, I had one of those "look in the mirror" types of realizations. Had I asked any of my distribution clients what they wanted to see on my site? Did I reach out to any association execs about what information or layout they found attractive or useful? Not a one. I spoke to no one outside of my business associate and perhaps my spouse. Were either of them planning to spend money with my company in

the future? To my irritation, I realized that I was embarking on another vanity website full of Jason's best ideas. In the process, I failed to recognize who the site was really for. I forgot to ask the customer.

I am sure that many of you can relate to this analogy. Perhaps some of you were way smarter than me and build your web-based offerings after gaining insight from your customer base. I hope you did. With the cost associated in creating or rebuilding an e-commerce platform, we must take the time to find out what our customers really want. This customer centric view of planning is not limited to technology investments. Roll back up to the start of this article. Many companies are trying to determine if curbside pickup or Zoom based sales calls will be a part of their ongoing protocols. As we ponder these questions, we need to invite our customer into the discussion. What do they want going forward? What would make their lives easier and more profitable? Do they even want a mobile app for placing orders?

Listening to the voice of the customer is something many distributors aspire to, but really don't understand how to do. Having a few of your salespeople reach out to their pet accounts and ask a couple of leading questions isn't going to give you to the best data. We have to do better. A few months ago, I interviewed a subject matter expert on my podcast. Martha Brooke, of Interaction Metrics has spent her career studying customer feedback and designing methods for capturing the voice of the customer. In fact, I have turned her on to a few of my distribution clients over the years. In

our discussion, we talked about survey design and how most survey questions are heavily biased. For example. “On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the comfort of our pillow top beds?” While this question might seem benign, the use of “comfort” and “pillow-top” is leading the responder to a more favorable rating. Don’t get me wrong, surveys are a great way to gather data on customer preference. When creating surveys, we just need to try to rid ourselves of bias.

Personal interviews can also be a great way to gather valuable customer feedback. Although I would generally recommend that companies hire an outside firm to conduct these interactions, I understand that this might not be a financial reality. If you are planning to conduct interviews using internal personnel, consider finding someone who has limited customer facing duties. If the customer knows the individual administering the interview, they might soften or temper some of the comments. WE are looking for a lack of bias here. Also, make sure that the questions focus on the customer and their needs rather than talking about our company services and capabilities. If we are looking for ideas on new service offerings, we must dig out the challenges that are holding our customers back.

Gathering this kind of information can give us insight in the changing demographics of our customer base. The emerging decision maker will approach their suppliers and general expectations very differently than their predecessor’s. We want to be on the forefront of these new expectations rather than being dragged into hasty modification. In companies all across the world, teams are working on the challenge of adapting to the new normal. Innovation is happening whether we like it or not. I simply have

one ask: Don’t leave your customer out of the process. Good luck.

About the Author:

Jason Bader is the principal of The Distribution Team. He is a holistic distribution advisor who is passionate about helping business owners solve challenges, generate wealth, and achieve personal goals. He can be found speaking at several industry events throughout the year, providing executive coaching services to private clients and letting his thoughts be known in an industry publication or two. Last year, he launched his first podcast, Distribution Talk. Episodes can be found at www.distributiontalk.com and through most podcast applications. He can be reached at (503) 282-2333 or via email at jason@distributionteam.com. You can find additional resources on his website: www.thedistributionteam.com