



Identifying With Your Customers

Asking questions and understanding your customers' business is the foundation of great service.

I've heard estimates that more than 60 percent of customers who moved their business to a different supplier did so because they were dissatisfied with the people who were servicing their business. They felt that they weren't understood and received poor customer service.

I know from personal experience how frustrating it is to discover that those responsible for customer relationships have not been attentive to the needs of their customers. Employing people who have good customer relationship skills is not just a plus—it's a must.

One customer that Coca-Cola serves is a wonderful and large chain of restaurants. These restaurants serve a varied menu of favorite American foods, including hamburgers and hot dogs. This particular customer had a long-standing relationship with Coca-Cola and was constantly interested in strengthening its own marketing and consumer relationships. Yet I began to hear feedback from our sales organization that the customer was considering switching to one of our competitor's soft drink products because of lower prices.

This customer had always been loyal to Coca-Cola, so I wondered if there might be deeper issues at hand—maybe we weren't

meeting the customer's needs. I arranged to meet with the owner of the chain.

The visit was set up in one of the customer's restaurants. Over a hot dog and a chocolate shake, I talked with the owner about his business and its future. He pointed out that his business was under pressure from new restaurant competitors and his sales were suffering. The owner clearly needed support to grow his overall sales, not just sales of our products. Coca-Cola was focused too narrowly on the product and service aspect of our relationships with that customer. I realized that our relationship needed to expand to include other forms of marketing support.

Questioning him further, I decided that tapping into the marketing strength of the Coca-Cola Company might work for his needs by supporting their efforts to increase overall sales with exciting cooperative soft drink marketing inside his restaurants.

In the ensuing years we helped him develop better signage, more interesting marketing promotions, and advised him on other ways of creating excitement, including tie-ins between the restaurants and some of the sports and entertainment organizations with whom Coca-Cola already had established promotional relationships. His business increased, and he appreciated our efforts. He remains a loyal customer to this day.

Understanding your role

The reality is that customers always look for—and expect—more from you because every day competitors bombard your customers with options that may also meet their needs; and many of your customers who on-sell your products to others are facing increasing demands for more service from *their* customers.

To determine how your product or service can benefit your customer, you must have a complete understanding of that customer's business. Do your homework. Ask as many questions as you can and pay attention to the



By listening to customers, Stahl learned the power of matching Coca-Cola's brands and services to customers' business needs.

answers. Build your understanding by asking each of the following questions:

1. What does success look like for your business?
2. What are your key business objectives and strategies?
3. How do you measure your firm's success?
4. What are the key challenges and barriers you face as an organization?

The answers to these questions will help you better understand the potential role your product and organization can play and will help to shape your strategy for how you sell your products or services to the customer.

It is also very important to understand how each key person in a customer's organization might personally win by adopting your product or service. This means understanding more than just the direct benefits of your relationship to their organization; focus also on the personal objectives of the individuals involved. Such personal objectives might include creating outstanding results, career advancement, or simply wanting to look good in front of their boss. You can gain a real advantage by acting to help them win personally, and in the process create benefits for their company and for yours.

Your customer typically has two ways to win—professionally and personally. Listening for both will create opportunities to serve your customer more effectively. ↻

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Stahl's Framework for Building Strong Customer Relationships

- Understand your customer.
- Understand what your customer really wants to buy and why.
- Prioritize your customer base.
- Identify the people who influence decisions about your product or service.
- Listen for opportunities.
- Develop a selling strategy.
- Present your proposal to the customer.
- Develop plans and execute agreements.
- Schedule stewardship and review meetings.