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ASK THE EXPERT

The Six Sources of B2B Customer Expectations

by Sam Klaidman and Harry Klein

In the old, pre-Web 2.0 days, businesses made promises (then called the brand) to prospects and customers that formed the basis of a potential relationship. These promises were then augmented by commitments made by sales people as the purchase decision came closer to fruition. These days, as a result of Google, social media, and instantaneous communications we see that the promises and commitments have now been replaced by expectations in the minds of prospects and customers.

As we performed research for our guide "Because I'm The Customer", we realized that business people talk about customer expectations but don't discuss their origins. Consequently, there is little to no discussion about how to prevent misconceptions from getting into people's heads and undoing all the company's communications and setting the relationship up to potentially fail.

Here is a list of the six expectation sources, with examples and actions that can be taken to minimize negative or inaccurate information from influencing your prospects and customers.

Caution: We make no claim that customers are being rationale when forming or holding expectations. It doesn't matter. It's all of our jobs to understand how expectations get set and how to best manage the resulting experiences.

1. Organizational promises

Source - Explicit promises made by the business (collectively) and not by individuals in the organization.

Example - Your quotes and order acknowledgments include statements like "delivery and installation will be completed within 45 days ARO (after receipt of order)."

Proactive Action - These expectations should be the easiest to manage as they are subjected to extensive review and approval before they are rolled out. The reviewers must be well versed in corporate positioning and communications management. More importantly, their insight must be informed by actual operational capabilities and performance.

2. Competitor's promises and/or performance

Source - If a competitor promises or does something beyond the experiences your company delivers, your customers and prospects will expect your company to either match or exceed the performance. Even if you don not believe there is an "apples to apples" comparison, your customers may not understand or care.

Example - Your competitors all ship standard items with next day delivery at no additional cost; you ship in three business days and charge extra for next day delivery.

Proactive Action – Don't establish even seemingly innocuous policies without understanding competitors' policies. Ensure you either do the same or more than they do IF that makes good business sense. You may not have to match item-to-item as long as your total package meets or exceeds the competitions' value proposition.

3. Personnel promises

Source – For whatever reason, your employee makes a promise (prospect demand, vague or unknown procedures, end of the quarter pressure to close business, or lack of employee engagement, etc.).

Example - Under pressure to close an order she says "Our software is so easy to use you will be up and running in a week or I'll come in and provide free training until you're satisfied." This promise will most likely backfire. Either the software really isn't that easy to use, the promise won't be honored, or going onsite will eat up a large portion of the profit from the sale.

Proactive Action – Make sure that all customer-facing employees understand the fine line between helping a customer and making unrealistic promises (sales puffery). A great subject for ongoing training.

4. B2C experiences

Source – We all are consumers in the Age of the Customer. We are socially connected and well informed. We carry our consumer experiences with us into the workplace.

Example - If you order consumer goods and get free 7-day delivery with a small up-charge for 3-day delivery you may now expect to have the same options when you order business related goods or services.

Proactive Action – On a continuous basis, collect customer feedback for the various touchpoints customer's experience with your company. Adjust performance as necessary.

5. Previous experiences with your business

Source – Customers anticipate experiences based on past purchases. This occurs if they purchase the same product or service from your firm or a completely different one. Regardless of what they're buying, the purchase is with the same company, so consistency is anticipated.

Example – If you normally fill a medical prescription at a local pharmacy chain you expect the same easy transaction if you use their mail-order service. Same medicine, same company but frequently a different experience. Or, you shop in a brick and mortar store and receive very informed, personnel assistance then decide to order online because of a lower cost. You then call the contact center with questions about setting the product up and are disappointed when the agent is neither as helpful or knowledgeable as the salesperson in the store. Again, same product, same company.

Proactive Action – Communicate expectations at the time of purchase and reinforce at time of delivery. Make certain access to support is also made crystal clear.

6. Comments from friends and associates

Source – Social media, off-line conversations and the like.

Examples – If your business associates tell you they all had terrible experiences with a company and stopped buying from them, well, obviously you're not likely to buy. If angry tweets abound a company, well, thanks but no thanks!

Proactive Action – Monitor social media, implement a Governance Plan, and empower monitors to act aggressively within the constraints of the plan. Also, implement a retention plan to find out if your customers are reference-able.

Managing expectations is not something to be taken lightly or quickly dismissed – it can make-or-break a business. And it is not the function or any one group; it is a responsibility that must be planned and shared so your prospects and customers have a WOW moment when they deal with you.

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