Two Essential Lenses on the Customer Experience: VOC Surveys & Mystery Shops

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Value of VOC (Voice of Customer) Surveys

Every company's most critical asset is its customers, and no company can afford to disregard the importance of listening to the Voice of the Customer (VOC) through customer surveys. Surveys are an invaluable way to understand where your company stands when it comes to customer satisfaction and future purchase intent.

Customer surveys typically ask customers to rate aspects of their experiences with a company (e.g., products, prices, service, etc.) and their feelings toward the brand (e.g., level of trust, engagement, loyalty, etc.). Some surveys are much longer than others, but at a minimum, an ongoing customer survey should provide an overall gauge of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and/or advocacy. To achieve this purpose, commonly used survey questions capture ratings on:
  » Overall satisfaction
  » Overall satisfaction compared to what was expected
  » Overall satisfaction compared to an ideal experience
  » Likelihood to recommend
  » Likelihood to continue purchasing same products/services
  » Likelihood to increase percentage of spend (versus purchasing from another provider)
  » Likelihood to switch to a different provider

The Limitations of VOC Surveys

I have first hand experience in dealing with the actionability limits of customer survey data. Before coming to BestMark, I was employed as a senior manager in the Research & Analytics Department at Best Buy Co., Inc. (NYSE: BBY), a Fortune 100 company and the largest specialty retailer of consumer electronics in the United States and Canada. The ultimate purpose of my former team is to ensure that customer experiences at Best Buy continually improve and lead to higher retention and profitability. Among other responsibilities, I was directly responsible for managing Best Buy's mystery shopping and customer survey programs.

As a member of this team, I would nervously watch the customer ratings captured through our web-based surveys. Decreases in year-over-year customer ratings caused great concern across the company, while year-over-year improvements were widely celebrated. In both cases, my team needed to clearly explain to company leaders and the board of directors why these scores changed each month and what needed to be done to continually improve scores. This was no small task.

Many employees throughout the company had their own theories and explanations for score changes, especially those who held leadership positions at the store, district or regional levels. During times when

we saw significant drops in scores, some frustrated retail teams even turned on the measurement tool, claiming that the survey must be capturing feedback from the wrong customers or wasn't capturing feedback from enough customers because they were sure their customers were happier than the ratings indicated.

How were we able to explain the significant fluctuations in customer satisfaction and loyalty and help Best Buy understand how to improve and prioritize efforts?

In order to respect Best Buy's confidential information, I cannot provide the specific survey scores or specific challenges my team addressed, but as a general example, imagine that customer survey ratings on associate "availability to help" and "product knowledge" were both down. It is vitally important to have visibility to this downturn in customer satisfaction because we know through analytics that prolonged downturns in "availability to help" and "product knowledge" will lead to downturns in overall customer loyalty and sales.

But WHY are customers reporting that "availability to help" and "product knowledge" is lower than before, and what can Best Buy associates specifically do to turn the situation around? How do we know what improvement goals to set when we don't know how long customers are currently waiting to be assisted or what employees are saying that is making customers think that they don't know what they're talking about?

The level of detail needed to answer these questions is not feasible on a customer survey; customers remember how they felt about interactions, but they are typically unable to accurately recall specifics from an interaction, such as how long they truly waited for assistance. Also, since more and more companies are now asking customers to take surveys, resulting in dwindling interest and likelihood for customers to take the time to respond, a survey must be focused and concise. Surveys that require more than a few minutes of customers' time or ask them to answer confusing or open-ended questions are much more likely to end up with very low response rates, which causes low statistical validity.

The Value of Mystery Shops

Fortunately, critical information gaps can be filled by mystery shops. A primary objective of mystery shops is to understand exactly what customer delight-driving behaviors look and sound like. A quality mystery shopping provider, with research knowledge and the ability to link behaviors to loyalty outcomes, will ensure that mystery shop results bring to light the SPECIFIC behaviors associates need to exhibit and improve upon in order to foster customer delight and loyalty.

Mystery shop data armed my Best Buy team with the ability to explain changes in customer satisfaction scores and provide specific measurable details with which retail Best Buy teams could create action plans and goals. For example, instead of simply reporting that Best Buy must bring up the overall customer satisfaction ratings on "availability to help" and "product knowledge," we could share details from the latest round of mystery shops and create goals such as:

- » The average customer wait time was five minutes and 32 seconds; our goal should be to assist every customer within three minutes of entering a department.
- » Only 75% of associates were able to correctly answer specific product questions; our goal next month should be 100%.
- » Associates explained the differences between at least two products during only 35% of the shop interactions; our goal for next month should be at least 50%.

In addition to driving company-wide focus on exactly how to improve customer experiences, mystery shops are an extremely effective way to improve suggestive selling, ensure compliance with legal requirements, and identify best practices that should be recognized and shared across the organization. As I experienced at Best Buy, when aligned properly with your VOC measurement tool, mystery shopping results will provide critical information and become a reliable predictive indicator of customer satisfaction and sales.

[1] Net Promoter, NPS, and Net Promoter Score are trademarks of Satmetrix Systems, Inc., Bain & Company, and Fred Reichheld. Available from http://www.netpromoter.com/netpromoter_community/index.jspa; Internet; accessed 1 September 2009.

[2] Claes Fornell, The Satisfied Customer (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 204-6.

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About BestMark

BestMark was founded in 1986 to help leading companies close the gap between the promise of service excellence and its actual delivery. Today, BestMark is one of the nation's largest customer experience measurement and mystery shopping companies, and our Fortune 500 clients represent some of the most innovative and successful customer-focused organizations in the world. Simply put, our approach is designed to isolate the key behaviors that drive customer delight and show our clients how to leverage this information to increase customer loyalty, advocacy and profitability.

About the Author

In 2008, Celine Nelson joined BestMark, a leading provider of mystery shopping and customer experience measurements. Prior to joining BestMark, Celine worked for Best Buy Co., Inc. (NYSE: BBY), a Fortune 100 company and the largest specialty retailer of consumer electronics in the United States and Canada. During her eight-year tenure at Best Buy, Celine led various initiatives to measure company performance and gather deep consumer insights to direct business decisions. She hired and managed the work of numerous mystery shopping companies and learned first-hand what criteria to look for when identifying a high quality mystery shopping provider.