

THE CUSTOMER-CENTRIC ORGANIZATION

Leaders constantly juggle keeping different constituencies happy: customers, shareholders, employees, managers, labor leaders, Board members, regulators and public officials, to name a few. It's understandable that executives occasionally lose focus while they're trying to juggle the needs of all these groups. However, building a customer-centric organization can improve nearly every aspect of a company's performance while keeping everyone else happy too.

What do we mean by “customer centric?” And how do you build a customer-centric organization?

Being “customer centric” is a simple, yet profound concept. Whether it's someone inside your organization asking for information or someone outside looking to buy your services, being “customer-centric” is all about your orientation. And increasingly, it's not just about serving customers well. It's providing customers an experience that consistently surprises and delights them.

Here's why focusing on the customer experience will positively influence every aspect of your business:

- In a digitally connected world, satisfied customers will create a referral base for new customers, which will increase revenues and satisfy shareholders.
- In a customer-centric organization, employees spend less time dealing with angry customers. Instead of spending time putting out fires, the company can focus on introducing new products or services.
- Being customer-centric enables companies to win accolades and recognition, which enables it to attract talented people to the organization.
- A customer-centric organization creates a strong sense of loyalty among both customers and employees. Because retention levels are high, you'll spend less money dealing with churn.
- A customer-centric company can more easily gain support for regulations or legislation that further the company's interests.
- Being customer-centric also helps in a crisis. The most effective way to get through a crisis is by putting customers' needs first—whether that involves a delivering a sincere apology, a product recall, a refund or other measures. This will come naturally to a company that has ingrained the habit of putting customers ahead of everything else.

What is Good Customer Service?

This is a story of what is good customer service – and how the small things matter. Ultimately, it's a story about trust.

I recently bought a new Nissan hybrid. As part of the deal, I turned in my previous Nissan, which I had leased. The sales manager at the dealership told me they'd take care of all the “turn in costs,” including any excess wear and tear on the vehicle (it had some minor scrapes on the fenders). We didn't put that part of the deal into writing. It

was a verbal acknowledgment. I had their word that they'd take care of it. "Good customer service," I thought.

To my surprise, three months after I bought the new car, I got an excess wear and tear bill from Nissan on the old car totaling \$250. Not a lot of money. But I wasn't going to pay it. It was the dealer's responsibility. We had a deal.

So I called the dealership to talk to my salesperson. Unfortunately, he had left the company. I was transferred to a man named Glen. After I explained the situation, Glen said he would handle it for me. "Thank you," I told him, my trust meter rising. "Just fax me the invoice from Nissan," he said. I did, and I figured that was the end of it.

A month later, I got a call from a debt collection service. "Where's the money you owe us?" a Mr. Frezell asked. I explained the situation and said that the dealership had promised to take care of it. "You should talk to them," I said.

"We don't talk to anyone but you," said Mr. Frezell in the tone of voice that only a debt collector can love. After a few attempts to get him to see the situation from my point of view, I hung up the phone.

My next call was to the dealership. How could they not have taken care of this, I asked myself? We had a deal. My trust meter was dropping. My relationship with Nissan hung in the balance.

When Glen got on the phone, I explained the latest chapter. "This debt collection service has called me and said I still owe this money."

"I don't get it," Glen said. "Let me look into it and call you back."

Less than 30 minutes later, Glen called back. "I researched this. We wrote a check to Nissan three weeks ago. The check has been endorsed and deposited. I'll fax the check so you can see for yourself. And give me the number of Mr. Frezell and I'll be happy to talk to him."

Latest update: Glen called Mr. Frezell and wrote him a letter, including copies of the check showing that Nissan had deposited it. No further word from the debt collection agency.

Today, my trust meter in Nissan is at a high point. This story could have gone the other way – and cost Nissan a long-term loyal customer. But because of Glen, the scales tipped toward trust. It helped me remember that every customer relationship hinges on small but crucial moments of good service.