

What are Customers Asking For? Don't Assume, Just Ask Them!

Thank goodness for the Yak cut-rate long-distance call system. In the past few months I've been working with several new clients on improving their customer relationships. If companies truly want to be customer-first, then they have to learn what customer-first means in the customer's words.

Thus, the long-distance phone calls. Some clients tremor when I suggest to them that I contact customers before I train their people on the skills and processes associated with building enduring business partnerships. Immediate responses have been: "Well, we don't really want to bother them", or as one cynical individual uttered, "They want it free, perfect and yesterday, so don't waste their time or our money." What's driving these knee-jerk responses: fear, blindness, and denial.... all natural instincts, but not the stuff to cement long-term enduring business relationships.

My courageous customers encourage me to find out more than they think they know. This article will share some of the voices I've heard, and some of the lessons I've learned by taking this customer-first tact.

For each of my customer's customers' organizations that I work with, my strategy has been to seek insight from varied levels and functions: sr. executives who have a double-digit strategic horizon of view; mid level individuals from the planning, supply chain, quality and operations areas who are accountable for the improvement of their business processes; and front-line doers...buyers, production workers, and engineers, whose daily pain or joy is directly associated with the performance of their suppliers. I initially send them an email, outlining my intent. When I confirm by phone, I ask them for 20 minutes of openness and honesty. I promise them anonymity. I restate the ideas, and examples, of what I heard them say, and the message of what they didn't say, but I heard nonetheless. I use their exact phrases, not some clinical, grammatical clean up so that the feelings are not lost.

Some of the personal lessons for me out of the interviewing experience...

- Most people are delighted to talk with me. They say they have never had conversations like this from the suppliers who are instrumental in their operations or strategic future.

- Cost/quality/delivery issues are only the tip of the iceberg.
- When you display an authentic interest, and listen non-defensively, people will talk and talk.
- The replay back to them of what I've heard them say or not say, usually spurs them on to even more examples and comments.
- When customers are willing to take the time to talk about their supply base, that means they are willing to invest in whatever it takes to net improvements.
- Customers don't just pour out clinical requirements. The right questions and responsive listening will yield "careabouts" and emotions that are surprisingly deep and complex.

The kinds of questions I ask...

- What are the pressures your industry/organization/department is facing that are different than the recent past?
- How does your supply base impact these challenges?
- When you think of X supplier and your experiences with them, what are the words that come to mind?
- What are some examples of actions they've taken that have significantly impacted your organization?
- What does it feel like to work with them?
- What do you most value from them? Why?
- What do you want them to continue to do? Why?
- What would you like them to start doing? Why?
- What would you like them to stop doing? Why?
- When you think of the best supply partner you've ever had, what are some of the things that they did?
- What have you never told them about your organization or their performance?
- If you had to convey one key message to this supply organization, what would it be?

Some answers heard from customers round the world...

- We always need improved quality and delivery. What was an acceptable part 6 years ago would not be let in the door today.
- A key ingredient is for employees to have more than a cursory understanding of our business....what is driving us and what we are facing in our competitive environment.

- Stay connected with all of the different groups here. If they don't keep their name out front, chances are they won't be thought of first.
- Be realistic, be honest because that will be the best for you in your relations with us. If you can't do it, tell us you can't. Tell us when you can do it. Don't give us expectations or deliverables that you can't meet. We might not like the answer all the time, but that's O.K., but if it's a real answer, we will deal with it. The deliverable is negotiable.
- First seek to understand us, and then work to be understood. Listen and understand our challenges and probe to find out more before making offers and comments.
- We expect proactivity and ideas on how we can be more effective, how we can automate a process, how we can remove physical bodies, how we can reduce costs. Don't wait for us to ask.
- Be innovative and know the market that you are serving, know what's coming down, what are the ideas that people are looking to bring out.
- Get back to me in a timely manner; contact me and let me know that people are working on it. Take the initiative instead of me having to take the initiative.
- Our best supplier is #1 in communications. You ask them for a quote/response and you get it that day.
- I don't want to hear suppliers say, "we can't do this" or "these are the rules". I need an organization where people take ownership and look for solutions.
- We need our suppliers to be able to adapt to the changes we're facing. They need to understand the responsiveness that we must be to our customers.
- I need suppliers to respond to requests or questions in a timely manner and to give me a date where I'm going to get something.
- Be prepared with information, and be organized ahead of the meeting so everybody knows what's going on. An action item from a previous meeting should be completed and documented so people can review. Make commitments you can keep. Anticipate technology trends and have it available, rather than wait for somebody to ask for it.

Continued on page 26

Continued from page 8 — OLED update

developed a single-panel active matrix-based (AM) OLED display. At 21-inches, this OLED features a resolution at 6.22 million pixels and boasts a wide ultra-extended graphics array (1920x1080). In addition, the company adopted AM-based technology for its low power consumption and high-resolution qualities. Samsung's new OLED offers brightness of 400 ANSI Lumens, a contrast ratio of 5000:1, and fast response times, making the product ideal for viewing HD-resolution video images. Moreover, the Samsung OLED display uses Amorphous Silicon (a-Si) technology; thus can be mass-produced within Samsung's existing TFT-LCD lines. Samsung Electronics has now applied the a-Si technology to produce large-sized OLED panels within 4th and 5th generation production lines.

Seiko-Epson also has plans to develop mainstream OLED technology within three years, to gain an edge in the market for screens manufactured for televisions and other entertainment applications. The Japanese manufacturer would like to develop new display panels that are technically competitive with and less expensive than current LCD and Plasma panels, says Tetsuya Mizuno, manager of Seiko Epson's OL Business Planning Department. Seiko Epson has unveiled a 40" prototype OLED display, that demonstrates the company's research progress and to generate interest in OLED among materials manufacturers. Cooperation with these manufacturers is important if Seiko Epson is to meet its self-imposed 2007 deadline, according to Mizuno.

LG Philips is also developing OLED

technology and has unveiled their 20.1" prototype active matrix OLED display. It is based on "low-temperature polysilicon, where active components are integrated across the display glass. This lets the OLED display be made using modifications of existing techniques and production lines. According to reports, the OLED display contains 3 million pixels, suggesting that it has a resolution of 2,028 pixels by 1,536 pixels.

Other companies have also announced OLED displays that are larger than 20.1 inches, but these have actually contained a number of smaller units stuck together. This next generation display technology is now making headlines and it is only a matter of time before it becomes mainstream product alongside DLP, LCD and Plasma Displays.

MITSUBISHI HOME THEATRE DLP™ PROJECTORS

Impeccable performance, unsurpassed reliability.

Join us.

HC100

- 480p
- 2000:1 Contrast
- 1300 ANSI Lumens



HC900

- 576p
- 4000:1 Contrast
- 1500 ANSI Lumens



HC2000

- 720p
- 3600:1 Contrast
- 8-Segment Colour Wheel
- Whisper Quiet 23 db



Dealers & Agents Wanted

CONTACT
MITSUBISHI ELECTRIC SALES CANADA
 Elan Azar, General Manager
 Tel: 905-475-7728, ext 115
 elan.azar@mesca.mea.com



Continued from page 12
What are Customers Asking For? Don't Assume, Just Ask Them!
 from Cheryl Crumb

- Include me in meeting minutes and timing charts so I can look at the open issues. Keep me in the loop. Let me know when a meeting is so I can participate.
- We expect zero defects. We also know this is an imperfect world but we want them to find ways to catch those internally and not let them get to us. We want to be warned and put countermeasures in place so we don't pass it to the end user.
- Don't drop bombs on me. If you have bad news, be upfront. Tell me as soon as you know there's a potential problem so that we can work out solutions together.

Some of the key messages? Honest, straight communication on a frequent, unasked for basis. People taking ownership to make things happen. A profound knowledge of the customer's organization, industry, and challenges. Proactivity. Offers that were even better than what the customer asked for. People in all areas of the company initiating ideas and solution.

Yes, they still want competitive prices, top quality, and on-time delivery, but if you ask the right questions and listen hard, you'll find that there's so much more to discover.