

WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?

BY BILL HOGG & SARAH KEOGH

If I was to ask you who you're working for, what would you say?

- a) Your company?
- b) Your boss?
- c) Yourself?
- d) Your customers?

Most people, when they are honest, answer a, b or even c. But if you answered d, are you **really** working for your customers, or just paying lip service to it?

It seems everyone is talking about "customer-focus". I love the phrase "customer-focus" because it recognises a fundamental truth that too many people seem to forget – that customers are your *raison d'être* – whether your company deals with consumers, other businesses, or both. Your customers pay your salary, not some faceless company.

Being customer-focused makes more than just instinctive sense, the more focussed you are on customers; the more likely you are to meet and exceed their expectations, needs and wants. And the more you meet and exceed their expectations, needs and wants, the more likely you are to have happy, loyal customers. And the more happy and loyal your customers are, the more likely they are to spend above the category average with you. A win-win situation, if ever there was one.

I'm not going to pretend that being customer-focused is easy -- because it's not. It requires an absolute dedication to the cause, starting from the top, right on down throughout the organization. But the process involved is relatively simple. I've broken it down into two lists – things you **Need To Do**, and things you **Need To Review**.

Need to Do

1. **Listen.** To your customers, to the market, to your staff. And never stop listening. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you know everything you need to know about people. Through listening come insights and insights are what drive any business.

Take FedEx for example. Years ago, when listening to people talk about their delivery needs, they realised that there was a market need for overnight deliveries *guaranteed* to arrive at a specific time the next day. The likely cost of this service was such that it would only be used when deliveries *really* did have to get there on time - so the on time guarantee meant everything. And FedEx delivers... that's why they're the #1 express transportation company.

2. **Take Ownership.** Own every issue that affects your customers, even if you don't *technically* own what's causing the problem. You may not have full control over your customers' experiences, but if your customers are disappointed by something while using your brand, you'd better take ownership of the problem, and fix it. Because it's your brand that will take the flak... and the glory.

For example, when Virgin took over the two British Rail franchises in 1997, all it 'owned' was the right to run certain timetables on certain tracks. The trains belonged to another company, as did the railway infrastructure. So, when a train was delayed as a result of a signalling problem, Virgin took

187 Willow Farm Lane
Aurora, Ontario L4G 6K5
(905) 841-3191
bill@billhogg.ca
www.billhogg.ca



BILL
HOGG
& ASSOCIATES

responsibility for solving the problem on their customers' behalf – apologising and paying them compensation, while working behind the scenes with Railtrack to attempt to make sure the problem didn't happen again. The bottom line was that the customers were sitting in a Virgin train when the delay occurred.

3. **Be Consistent.** Your customers need to know what to expect from you – not in a boring and repetitive way, but rather in terms of the quality and type of response you'll give them. By all means, do the unexpected, exceed their expectation – but always do it in a way that's consistent with their needs and wants, and your brand.

Southwest Airlines is a great example of this - you don't always know what they have in store for you on a flight, but you do always know that it'll be something you like.

4. **Attention To Detail.** Attention to detail is all about showing your customers that there is nothing you won't do in order to give them the best possible Customer Experience.

It's about that chocolate on your hotel pillow, that massage on your transatlantic flight, that reminder text about your partner's birthday, that unsolicited call to see if you've any problems using your new handset. It's also about not being satisfied with anything less than perfection – about arriving exactly on time, about returning calls exactly when you say you will, about having wait times that last no more than the time you say they will.

5. **Watch Your Language!** I'm not suggesting you're swearing at your customers...actually, it's worse! You're talking about them behind their backs in a pretty disparaging way. Hands up all of you who segment your customers by value, calling some your 'most important/valuable' customers, and, by implication, others your 'least important/valuable' customers? Many of you who segment your customers by lifestyle/lifestage, use quite unflattering names to describe certain segments?

Language guides behaviour and attitudes. So if you refer to your 'least important' customers in internal discussions or briefings, then there's a strong chance that your employees will treat those particular customers as though they don't matter. You don't mean for that to happen, but it does. Likewise with the lifestyle segments. Beware of using a single photo or personality to characterise a particular segment – Colin Farrell/Britney Spears may seem to characterise your 'fast and loose' segment, but not everyone in that segment will be just like them. Instead of 'most important/valuable' customers, how about something innocuous like 'highest yield/highest spending'?

6. **Measure Your Results.** The only way to know if you're really customer-focused is to ask them. Find out *from your customers* which particular aspects or attributes of your product or service are most important to them -- whether it's reducing wait times in retail outlets, or arriving on time, or having mobile coverage wherever you are, or having the latest fashions in stock, or having the best prices. The key here is 'from your customers' -- never presume that you know what they are.

When you know what to measure, set up independent monitoring systems -- usually a combination of qualitative (to explore) and quantitative (to validate and track) research. Establish the benchmark levels for the attributes, set realistic short and long term targets, and then see how you do.

Need To Review

1. **Your Brand.** Does your brand stand for something that's in keeping with the various needs and wants of your customers? If all of your employees 'lived' the brand's values, would the effect on your customers be positive? Too often, the brand dictates what a company does for its customers, whereas if you really customer-focused, then the needs/wants of customers should inform the brand.

2. **Your Organization.** Your organisational structure, your policies, your processes. Everything you do internally affects your customers. Does your structure encourage cross-functional working? Is it clear who is responsible for what? If your staff find it hard to manoeuvre around your business, then that will feed through to your customers – in the form of too much red tape, poor staff attitude (disgruntled staff ≠ happy customers), inflexibility, lack of product knowledge, lack of consistency.
3. **Your Products/Services.** Do your products/services meet the various needs and wants of your customers? Are they consistent with your brand? Too often, products/services are driven by other competencies of the company, such as technology, or even by the Finance department.
4. **Your Communication.** Is the content of interest/relevant to customers? Does it demonstrate how your company delivers a better customer experience? Is the tone of voice used consistent with your brand's values? And for communications *within* your company, are your employees getting the information they need to do their jobs to the best of their abilities? And are they getting it via the most suitable channels for the jobs they do (e.g. road-based staff need different channels from office based staff)? Are they getting it when they need it? It's the internal communications that are most often neglected. And in many ways, they're more important than your external communications -- poorly informed staff will not deliver the best possible customer experience.

So, who are you working for now? Do you have the right processes and tools in place to be successful?

Bill's passion is improving business results by working with leadership teams to change employee behaviours. He does this by equipping leaders with the principles, processes and tools to cultivate and influence an engaged customer-focused culture that recognizes improved performance and productivity. For additional information please visit online at www.billhogg.ca or email bill@billhogg.ca

© Copyright 2008 - Bill Hogg & Associates All Rights Reserved