



"I'll have the same again, please"

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Millions of people travel frequently to London, some for business, others for pleasure. For those who need to stay overnight, there are literally thousands of hotels to choose from so finding a room isn’t difficult. But talk to many of these visitors and you will discover that, by choice, they will always stay in the same hotel or the use the same chain time after time.

These customers are ‘loyal’ and, therefore treasured by the businesses they use because, as we know, for most companies customer loyalty is the single most important determinant of long-term growth and margins. We also know that it is far more cost effective to keep existing customers than find new ones.

But what are these businesses actually providing to make these customers loyal? In a word - consistency. These customers choose to stay in the same hotels and, quite probably, eat in the same restaurants, not just because they are satisfied but because they know what they are going to get and they get it every time. At every level, every product, service, location, department and touch point, the experience provides consistent levels of satisfaction.

Confidence and trust

Consistency is behind the success of all strong brands be it Aldi or Harrods. As marketers know, a brand is ‘a promise’ and the ability to deliver the promise consistently is what creates success. Breaking promises leads to dissatisfied customers. On the other hand, consistency builds customer confidence, and in turn, their trust. Customer trust enables brands to diversify into new markets taking customers with them – why else would you choose to buy insurance from a supermarket?

The reason customers buy from the same

company again and again is because we like a predictable experience. Whether we choose to stay in a Premier Inn or pick up a Starbucks on the way to work, we like knowing what to expect. Based on this, we tend to choose our suppliers where we know that the experience is going to be the same each time and there are unlikely to be any surprises. Generally speaking, customers do not like to take a risk.

Whilst it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to work out that consistency matters, research conducted by Cranfield School of Management’s Customer Management Forum has confirmed that consistency is as important as product satisfaction when it comes to driving satisfaction, trust and intention to repurchase.

Why is this? What do customers want? Today’s customers are busy and they are looking for a fail-safe method to speed up the process of selection when it comes to choosing who they want to do business with. On top of this, they want to be able to choose where, when and how they conduct business without any variation in standards.

Multi - channel consistency

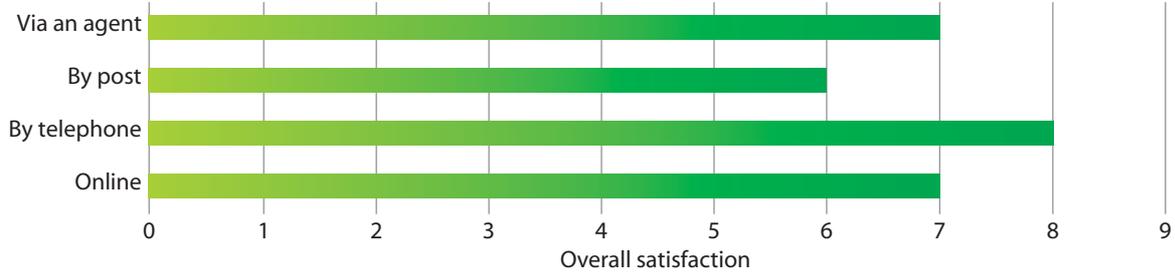
Customers see a company as a single entity and as a result, they expect the same level of performance in all their interactions - no matter who they deal with, or how they deal with it. They expect to be satisfied at any time of the week, the month or the year regardless of which channel they use to make purchases or make enquiries. This seems fair, why should customers have to make allowances based on their buying patterns?

Supermarkets have been particularly successful at creating multi-channel consistency. The percentage of customers shopping online, rather than popping into their local store, reflects this. Customers doing their weekly shopping online expect the same quality of experience they would get when visiting a store and the supermarkets are providing this. Using a music analogy – if you have a favourite band, you want to be equally satisfied with the way they sound whether you buy the cd, download an album or see them live.

The Cranfield research revealed the importance of multi-channel consistency not just for sales, but also for trust and advocacy.



Taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied have you been conducting business



Cranfield conducted two pieces of research. The first involved a company that delivered a utility product, and related services, through b2b channels. The findings of the research confirmed that consistency of information, impression and knowledge across all touch points is vital.

Furthermore, the research showed that multi-channel consistency is as important as product satisfaction when it comes to driving customer satisfaction, trust and intention to repurchase.

But the research indicates that the importance of consistency extends beyond just the purchasing transaction. Dr Hugh Wilson says: "We were quite taken aback by quite how important multi-channel consistency is... It seems that if the salesperson ploughs on with their sales pitch without mentioning the complaint which the customer made on the web yesterday, customers are as unforgiving as if the product doesn't work." This observation alone has far reaching implications for businesses when it comes to data sharing and internal communication etc.

The second piece of research involved a b2c organisation. In this case, the findings revealed that consistency was a driver of not just sales but also trust and advocacy. This makes sense – it is difficult to imagine customers offering recommendations based on 'yo-yoing' performance levels. It is all well and good to 'wow' the customer

from time to time but the effects are diminished if the rest of time their experience is less than satisfactory.

Survey implications

The findings of the research serve to highlight the importance of ensuring that any customer satisfaction measurement survey includes questions to determine how consistent performance is in the eyes of the customer. Naturally, beyond that the next stage is to identify where weakness lies, the causes of inconsistency and put systems in place to ensure they are ironed out.

The Cranfield research conducted included five core questions, devised by Rita Madaleno, designed to uncover inconsistencies:

Customers were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

I have a consistent impression from the company, regardless of the channel I use.

The information I get from the company is consistent across all channels.

Regardless of the channel I use, people I deal with are informed about my past interactions with the company.

I can choose from a range of channels whilst dealing with the company.

Regardless of the sales channel I use to purchase from the company, I can use other channels to get information or help.

The results reveal the differences in the perceptions of customers based on how they conduct transactions, thus revealing inconsistencies.

An obvious variation of this approach, requiring fewer questions, would be to use the questionnaire to ask multi-channel users to score their overall experience of each channel using a 1-10 scale. This would enable benchmarking based on customers' own scores, see chart above.

Over the last three months, which channels have you used for conducting business with us?

Online

By telephone

By post

Via an agent

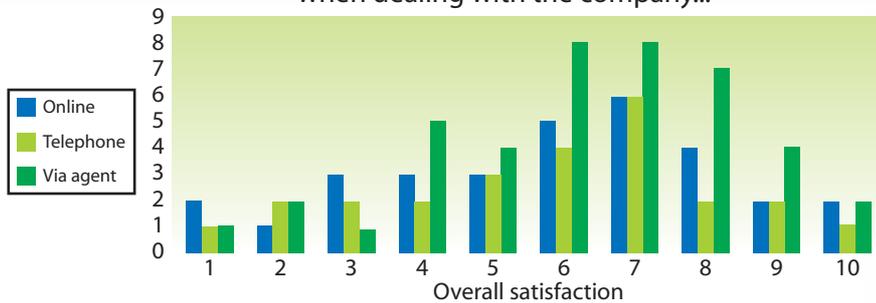
Taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied have you been conducting business...

	completely dissatisfied	completely satisfied
Online	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
By telephone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
By post	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Via an agent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>





I can choose from a range of channels when dealing with the company...



The diagram shows that customers who conduct business 'via agent' were most satisfied.

The advantage of this approach being that any inconsistency in the experience may be more noticeable to customers who 'mix and match' channels. Customers can be probed or asked to comment on the variations providing additional useful insight. For example, a customer who regularly goes into a branch of a bank to conduct transactions may have slightly different expectations of an online facility than a customer who has only ever transacted online.

Earlier in this article mention was made of 'promises'. In order to achieve consistency it is essential that sustainable performance targets, which can be both achieved and maintained across all touch points, are set. This is pivotal to providing consistent service. There is little point saying 'we deliver faster than any other mail order company' if this is only achievable for orders taken over the phone. Unrealistic expectations are unlikely to be met, let alone exceeded – and will only lead to disappointment.

It is only by understanding and meeting expectations across the breadth of the business that consistency can be achieved.

Managing consistency

What else can you do to ensure you are

measuring consistency? Consistency is not just about measurement and performance it is also about management.

1) Identify all the channels and touch points used by customers. Ensure satisfaction surveys cover all the areas.

2) Incorporate a measure of consistency into your customer satisfaction measurement processes. Use identical survey methods regardless of how the customer contacts you or makes transactions. Variation in data collection techniques can lead to a variation in results that can be misleading when making comparisons.

3) Put steps in place to gather contact data from all customers. You cannot survey customers if you do not know how to contact them. This may require considerable forward planning.

4) Segment satisfaction results to ensure you have a measure of performance across all touch points – products, services, location, departments, individual staff etc. Bear in mind, averages can hide the range of results. You may think your organisation is the best but in fact, a proportion of your branches might not be performing well at all. Segmentation will highlight inconsistencies.

5) Conduct analysis (such as correlation or regression analysis) to determine the influence consistency has on your cus-

tomers' satisfaction. Where there is a lack of consistency in performance levels – find out where it is and what is causing it.

6) Put processes in place to enable benchmarking. In order to do this effectively, you need to identify the channels that your customers use when dealing with you – be sure your research incorporates these channels. For instance – your customers may visit various retail outlets, purchase online and then use a customer service desk.

7) Share results with staff and manage performance levels. If one particular branch of a business is performing below par, work with staff to raise performance levels. Use internal benchmarking to share best practice.

But where does this leave 'wowing' the customer? The quest for consistency does not relieve organisations of the need to provide excellent service. A consistently poor level of service is hardly going to provide high satisfaction levels. Indeed, it is the organisations that provide consistently excellent service that lead the field. **S**

Sources:

Customer Management: Vol 14. Issue 4 The Marketer published by the Chartered Institute of Marketing. The Multi-Channel Challenge, Dr Hugh Wilson, will be published March 2008. Cranfield's Customer Management Forum www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/ccmf.

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