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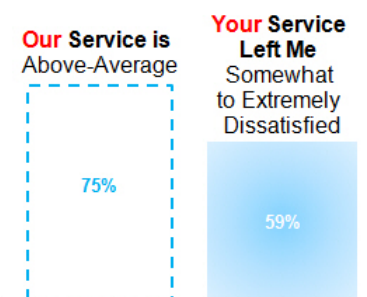
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Customer-Focused Culture by Living With Your Customers

by Lynn Hunsaker

You never know someone so well as when they live with you! What better way to transform your culture to truly customer-centric ways of thinking and doing, than to invite your customer to attend all your discussions? This has long been a practice at Amazon, since founder Jeff Bezos once started an executive meeting by announcing that an empty chair at the table represented “the customer”. Throughout the meeting, the executives were compelled to include the customer in their thought process, and to consider their comments’ implications on the customer, as if “he/she” were present.

This practice became a habit at Amazon, part of their corporate culture. CTO Werner Vogels explains: “It’s very important to have a culture where everybody understands what the core values of the company are. New starters are often surprised at how important focusing on the customer is to us and how good Amazon is at doing that. ... We often have meetings where we start off with a ‘customer voice’ — a success story, even sometimes a negative story, of a customer’s experience of buying on Amazon — and use those stories to drive our services to become better. ... We want to be the most customer-centric company on the planet.”



The elusiveness of true customer-focus is evident in several studies, such as Accenture’s Delivering the Promise study, where 75% of surveyed executives viewed their customer service as above-average, while 59% of their customers reported their experience with these companies’ service as somewhat to extremely dissatisfying. Another example is CMO Council’s Customer Affinity study where half of companies said they’re extremely customer-centric, but when customers of those companies were asked, only a tenth of them said those companies were extremely customer-centric.

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As Amazon exemplifies, building a customer-focused culture is an ongoing journey. This journey is called internal branding, where outside-in thinking is integrated into the job of everyone company-wide, managing their personal impact on customer experience. Top-performing companies in customer service, according to JD Power & Associates’ recent studies, are: Amazon, USAA, Jaguar, Ritz Carlton, Publix Super Markets, Zappos, Hewlett-Packard, T Rowe Price, and Ace Hardware. These companies are well-respected on several dimensions, demonstrating that it pays dividends to put customers’ well-being first.

Challenge your organization to follow their examples. Invite your “customer” to attend all your discussions company-wide, and see what a difference it makes in transitioning to outside-in thinking that results in actions your customers would agree are in their best interest. In the meantime you’ll be building customer affinity that translates to sustainable market leadership.

Find out how to customize these tips to your situation; contact the author lynn.hunsaker@clearaction.biz.