

Do you really want customer feedback? Ask the right way.

Lately, I have been inundated with customer feedback requests from what seems like every company with which I have even had a glancing blow. And all of these feedback requests have serious flaws.

Self-serving: The airline I flew wanted to know about my recent flight, but not about the other part of the same trip, which included one segment that was delayed five hours.

Bordering on harassment: My gym wants feedback (about what, I don't know or care) and they have sent me at least five or more requests reminding me they want my feedback. Apparently they don't take no for an answer.

Not interested in my opinion at all: The conference I attended last week says it wants my opinion, but sent a survey that focused more on my demographic profile than on my opinion.

Asking every possible question on earth: I got a questionnaire that I abandoned when I realized that after five minutes I was only twenty percent done, thanks to the helpful completion meter at the bottom of the survey.

Really, just give us a glowing review: Some companies send you a link to online customer response sites like Yelp, basically asking for you to provide a testimonial, and may even try to promote this action by offering a discount next time you come in.

Customer feedback can be very valuable. *If* done the right way, feedback requests can tell you what customers/clients/supporters are thinking, and can alert you to any issues. However, there's a big "if" there, and as evidenced by my own examples above, many organizations are not

handling these requests well.

Many times, I have provided specific feedback, only to never hear from the company again or see the problem addressed. I think the problem is that customer feedback requests straddle the line between communications/marketing and operations.

Communicators/marketers see asking for feedback as a way of communicating further with customers. Operations folks see feedback as a potential for improvement (theoretically). But if these two factions are not in consultation, you end up with customer feedback requests that don't actually address any issues the customer may be having or may even hurt the brand as customers are bothered by repeated requests or intrusive questions.

Before you ask for customer feedback, here are four things to keep in mind.

1. **Determine exactly why you want feedback.** Are you trying to assess your product/service? Are you trying to pinpoint problem areas? Do you want to get testimonials?
2. **Determine what you will do with the feedback.** Will you address any issues?
3. **Determine the best way to get the feedback.** Is it email? Or a phone call?
4. **Remember your customers are not obligated to give you feedback.** Customers are in fact doing you a favor by providing feedback. Respect their time. Don't harass them.

How do you handle customer feedback? Do you even ask for it? If you do, how do you go about it? Please let me know.

Tools save you money, except when they don't

Not a day goes by that I don't see a post about tools. Just this morning I saw this: "10 Social Media Tools for Small Businesses and Freelancers." We are obsessed with tools, especially the online and free variety.



watercolors sets 1 by
niftynotebook on Flickr

Tools exist to make jobs easier

It'd be hard to create this blog post without Microsoft Word or WordPress. If I wanted to make a cake, having an electric mixer would be helpful. But, owning or having access to tools, even the most advanced or professional type, does not make you a professional or an expert. In other words, owning a paintbrush does not make you an artist, any more than having Adobe Photoshop makes you a graphic designer.

Having a tool does not make you an expert

Say you bought some sculpting equipment. Do you think you will now be able to sculpt something like Michelangelo's David? Well, you might...*if* you had years of training, Michelangelo's genius, and some amazing Italian marble to work with.

The problem is not using tools to help you do your job, it's that some organizations and individuals believe they can substitute a tool for an expert, or worse, that having the tool (Adobe Photoshop comes to mind), makes you the expert.

Doing it yourself could cost you

Last week, I was meeting with my accountant and he told me about a new client he recently started working with. This client had been filing his taxes using a popular online tax software. It turns out that my accountant was able to find the client thousands of dollars in tax savings because the do-it-yourself client had not known how to take depreciation on his mortgage and other deductions. Having tax software does not make you an accountant. The reason accountants can charge for their time is that they know what to do with the tax software, they understand tax laws and how they affect individual situations.

How do you say wrong in Spanish?

Some organizations are turning to tools like Google Translate (or other online translation software) in order to save money by not hiring a professional translator. The results can be disastrous. Same can be said for do-it-yourself graphic design, website building and any number of services people think they can get for free or cheap.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was on a national environmental group's website. The group has chapters around the world, and in the Spanish version of the website, the word used for "chapters" was "capítulos," which quite literally means chapters in a book. In Spanish, capítulo is *not* used as a synonym for a section or group of people.

My advice is to only use tools for routine jobs and leave the skilled work to the professionals. It may seem to cost more to hire somebody, but as my accountant proved to his new client, it could end up saving you thousands down the road.

What do you think? Do you rely on tools to avoid hiring a professional?

One big marketing lesson from the MLK Day of Service

For several years now, there have been organized Days of Service on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day across the United States.

I love Days of Service. In 2013, I went to the big one organized around President Obama's second inauguration, where I joined thousands in putting together care packages for US troops. Yesterday, I went to the Montgomery County (where I live) Day of Service and learned to crochet squares, which will be joined together by other volunteers into blankets for needy people.



Crochet squares at
Montgomery County
MLK Day of Service

Yesterday, at the Montgomery County Conference Center, where the MLK Day of Service event was held, I saw hundreds of folks, representing various ethnicities and races, many of them children, all crammed together in a ballroom. All of them converging to volunteer in memory of Dr. King, to participate in a small project (crochet for one hour, like me) but selfless.

How do you get thousands of folks to volunteer? Generally, there's not enough budget for physical incentives (t-shirts, food, etc.) for everyone. People will need to transport themselves to the location and give up a chunk of their time. So why do people do it, year after year?

All sorts of people will take the time and devote energy to volunteering because there is payoff. The payoff is a feeling of accomplishment. They feel like they are helping out and perhaps, even making a difference.

The one big marketing lesson here is simple. **People want do things that make them feel good about themselves.**

A powerful motivation to get people to do what you want (buy a product, sign up for healthcare, etc.) is to focus on making people feel good about themselves.

Have you seen the TV commercials for Chantix (a medication to help people quit smoking)? The commercials tell the stories of individuals who decided to quit, generally because they want to live long lives for their families. They focus on how good people feel once they have stopped smoking, and what a great accomplishment it is.

We know good marketing understands and focuses on the intended target audience. Part of understanding a target audience is to know what will motivate action. Some marketers feel scare tactics work better (if you don't buy life insurance, you will be hit by catastrophic funeral costs you won't be able to afford). In my opinion, people prefer to feel good about their

choices (if you buy life insurance, you will have peace of mind).

What are your thoughts? Do you respond better to positive or negative marketing?

Would you make a good Etsy seller?

In Sunday's *Washington Post* there is an interesting interview (How to craft a successful career) with Chad Dickerson, CEO of Etsy. In case you've never had the urge to shop for handmade jewelry or other crafts, Etsy is *the* place to do that online. On Etsy, thousands of artists and crafters can sell their goods to a national/international market. It's a model that is working to the tune of \$1.35 billion in sales.

The part of the interview that caught my eye as a marketing communications professional was this:

Q. What do the best sellers on Etsy have in common?

A. The best sellers on Etsy have really great photography. They also tell stories about themselves, how they're inspired, how they make the things they sell. Those are the keys to being successful on Etsy.

In other words, to market yourself successfully you have to have a standout image and a great story. Your graphics and your storytelling ability is what makes you stand out from a really crowded marketplace.

This is true everywhere, not just on Etsy. If you are shopping for a product online, you need to be able to see what you are buying (**the power of image**) and know why this product is better than the rest (**the power of storytelling**).

Perhaps if you are struggling to get “eyeballs” to your blog or website or buyers to your bricks-and-mortar business, you need to take Chad Dickerson’s insight to heart. Perhaps you need to assess the power of your graphics and your story. Are they strong? Are they setting you apart from our competition (in a positive way, of course)?

Oh, and the other thing(it *should* go without saying) is that to be a good Etsy seller you have to **have a good product that people want to buy**.

What makes you buy on Etsy or anywhere else? Do you assess the strength of the graphics? Do you read the description and/or story?

What’s the goal behind the AMADC’s \$45 happy hour?

Note: AMADC is the Washington, DC chapter of the American Marketing Association (AMA) , which is a membership organization with chapters around the country. I am not a member of the AMA or AMADC, although I have attended its events in the past.

Last Friday, the AMADC tweeted about its upcoming happy hour (or AMA Networking Events as they call them) at a DC

restaurant. I clicked on the link and found out that to attend the happy hour, non-members must pay \$45 while members can attend free. According to what I saw, the happy hour/networking event is a chance to mingle with other people. This is a description from the AMADC website:

AMADC Networking Events are the place to get dialed into the DC marketing community. Make alliances for your business, find your next great employee, get active in the AMA, get career advice or maybe get your next job. Be sure to bring a ton of business cards, you are going to need them

There is no program, no speaker and at least from what I can see, no food or drink included in the price of admission. Just a chance to meet people (maybe).

Here's my conversation with AMADC on Twitter:



According to the @AMADC response above, the free happy hour for members is a “main benefit of membership.” This however, is not even mentioned in the AMADC’s website membership benefits page.

(Annual membership in AMADC is \$285, of which \$220 is for

national dues and \$65 for chapter dues.)

So, what is the marketing/strategic goal for the AMADC happy hours? Is the goal to reach non-members and show them value?

Are these happy hours simply membership perks? If so, fine. If I am understanding this correctly, members get to feel as though they are “saving” \$45 for each “networking event.

Here’s a question though: members don’t have to pay extra to attend. And while this may be a benefit of membership, just how valuable is it? *Remember cost is not equivalent to value.*

But, if these happy hours/networking events are also a chance to reach out to non-members and perhaps even to recruit new members, then charging \$45 is not accomplishing that goal. I can tell you that from experience, specifically with the AMADC.

When I first moved to DC nearly ten years ago, I attended one of the AMADC happy hours at a bar downtown. The cost then was \$25 (why the nearly 100% increase is another question). I got to the bar, where I knew nobody. There was a section reserved for the AMA (right off the main bar, and not even clearly marked off). They offered no snacks, or drinks (or even discount drinks other than the regular happy hour stuff). There were no name tags. Nobody offered to act as an AMA ambassador and welcome people. I tried talking to a couple of people but having a conversation over the bar’s loud background noise was near impossible. In short, it was a waste of time and money. I could’ve just gone to the bar on my own, ordered a beer, sat right next to the AMA DC section, and gotten as much out of it while saving \$25.

Is the AMADC’s goal to be in line with other organizations in town?

Meanwhile, the other membership organizations in town also host monthly happy hours, however, this charge of \$45 for a

happy hour is the highest I have seen. For example, IABCDC does not charge for its happy hours. Everyone pays for what they consume. Various communications meetups such as DC PR Flacks don't charge either. The PRSA-NCC charges everyone for its PRO Net happy hours (\$10 for members and \$15 for non-members) but the fee includes a free drink and appetizers.

Is the goal to encourage networking among members?

Other organizations charge between \$35 and \$65 for non-members to attend chapter meetings, professional development events or luncheons/dinners. In fact, AMADC charges \$50 to non-members and \$30 for members for its professional development events. Bear in mind that at a professional development event or at a meal, people are getting a tangible benefit.

Why would networking be considered a more important benefit than professional development? Why not make professional development the perk of membership?

Is the AMADC's goal to make money off networking events?

Obviously, when there is a cost involved for the organization (the meal, the room rental, etc.), there is a reason to charge both members and non-members. Many organizations use sponsorships to defray the overhead costs, and so that they can offer discounts to their members. For the upcoming AMADC happy hour, a local organization is sponsoring the event. Since people have to pay for their drinks and food, there is no cost to the AMADC other than a room rental or guarantee fee, which I assume is being covered by the sponsorship. The non-member fee would seem to be a money-maker.

Is the goal to show non-members what they would save?

Perhaps the AMADC is imagining a scenario where a non-member signs up for this event, has a wonderful time and makes a lot of new contacts, and figures that if he or she signs up for membership, he/she could go to this events "for free" thus

“saving” \$45.

So what are the AMADC's goals?

I don't know and I can't tell what the AMADC's goals are. It's not clear to me what it is aiming to accomplish by charging so much for a happy hour. In my opinion, there is little value to a happy hour and very little reason to spend \$45 to attend one. Yes, I understand there is a networking opportunity. But as mentioned above, there are many other free and lower cost opportunities in town. Plus, going to a happy hour at a loud bar is not necessarily the best way to network.

What do you think? Would you pay this fee? Why or why not?

You won't know until you try

My nieces are a bit fussy when it comes to food. They don't really want to try foods they haven't had before. I once made a pasta dish, and my four-year old niece looked at it with absolute horror. I told her she had to try it, and if she didn't like it, she didn't have to finish eating it. She tried it and she didn't like it (it had spinach in it, and she is not a fan since as she put it “I don't like the green stuff”).

Sometimes you just don't know until you try, yet we seem to work hard to avoid finding out for ourselves. If we are researching hotels, we read reviews on travel advice sites. If we are looking for a service professional, we check out ratings. We ask around. We want information before we make a decision.

Just today, I noticed what someone posted in a networking

group in which I belong. She wanted to know about people's experiences with the group because she was considering joining. In my opinion, networking is personal. You will have your own experiences and it is always worth it to attend a meeting or two to get a sense of the people and if it is a right fit for you. What others feel is almost completely irrelevant.

You just have to try it for yourself. Word of mouth and reviews can provide insight, but ultimately, what matters is how your experience goes.

The experience counts more

Several weeks ago, I asked my Facebook friends if they had any handyman recommendations. My long-time handyman had retired due to injury and I needed someone to do a few things around the house. A friend passed on the name of someone who had done some work in his house. I contacted the handyman. He asked me to send him an email detailing what I needed done. He didn't respond. I called again. He assured me he would respond. He didn't. I called again. He was on vacation. Normally, I would have never contacted him again, but because he was recommended I did.

Finally, about three months after my initial contact, the handyman came to give me an estimate for the work. It seemed quite high but I scheduled the work since by this time I was desperate to get it done. The handyman sent two of his guys to do the work. They were nice enough but not highly skilled. They did not even have a tool kit with them (I had to give them a screwdriver!). They finished doing the work. The main handyman stuck with his original estimate. I questioned it and I ended up paying almost \$200 less than he estimated (the work took one and a half hours and he had estimated five). I tried working with this handyman based on a trusted friend's recommendation but the actual experience of working with him was not to my liking. I will not hire him again.

The marketing dilemma

Many marketers spend time on getting positive reviews and referrals, and those can stimulate people to try a product or service. But ultimately, the customer/client experience is what counts. People will stick with something and recommend it only if the experience itself is good.

The dilemma for many marketers is that many times we are hired to stimulate interest, but have no control over the user experience. If a company has hired many marketers to try and drum up interest for a product or service, chances are it is not the marketing that is lacking. It may well be that the product or service is not living up to the marketing.

What are your experiences with this? How does can marketing be better tied to user experience?

You need both form and function

One of the houses in my neighborhood has recently gone up for sale. I presume it did anyway because this is the sign that went up in front of the house:



We've all seen for sale signs in front of homes. They generally look like this:



"Boost the Market Value of Your Home" by Dan Moyle on Flickr

Notice anything different between these signs?

It seems that this is a case where a company is so anxious to have their format look different than the competition that it forgets about the function.

You can barely make out the telephone number and website of the realtor in the sign at the top. In fact, you'd probably have to drive right up to the sign (and perhaps that is the intent). Also, the sign at the top does not have the words "for sale" anywhere on it. Someone passing by does not know if the house has already been sold or if it is for rent.

So the next time you are itching to change your graphic identity, remember that you need both form and function. **If you don't consider what the piece is for, and how people will interact with it, you won't be doing a good job of communicating.**

What do you think? Does having a real estate sign that looks markedly different than others make your home stand out?

5 easy and effective marketing tips for service providers

If you are a service provider, you are probably really good at what you do. You are probably not so good at promoting yourself. If, on the other hand, you are good at what you do and you know how to market yourself properly, you will have business coming out of your ears.

I know because I deal with service providers—and I am one myself. Our first order of business should be to provide the best service possible. But our second order of business, and in order to keep business, is to market ourselves properly.

Here are five easy and effective marketing tips:

1. **Be ultra-professional.** It should go without saying, but the most important thing a service provider can do is to provide good service and a good impression.

- **Be on time.** Punctuality shows respect for your customer's time.
- **Honor your commitments.** If you say you will do

something, you must do it!

- **Be straightforward.** Is there an issue? Speak up.
- **Communicate** what, how, why of what you are doing.

2. **Introduce yourself properly.** When meeting with a customer, do not assume they know who you are. You don't have to provide your complete bio, but you should give your name and what you do. For example: "Hi, I am Joe Smith. I am an AC tech with XYZ company and I will be checking your system today." Or: "Hi, I am Gina, I will be teaching this beginner-level yoga class. "

3. **Provide a leave-behind or take-with.** It could be a brochure or a business card. It would be best if your materials have your website address and your website is good and up-to-date. You want to give the customer a way to contact you and to find out more about you.

4. **Send a welcome/thank you letter, card or email.** After you meet or provide service to your customer, send something! If you are an art studio, for example, and you just signed up a new art student, send the student a welcome note and any information the student might need. If you are a painter, and just finished painting your customer's house, send a thank you for your business card or email.

5. **Ask for referrals.** You should have a way to ask for referrals. You could simply have a line in your thank you letter saying that you appreciate referrals. You could provide a discount or a freebie for any referrals. For example, A teacher at the yoga studio I just started going to announced that if you bring a friend to the studio, you get a free class (mind you, the owner of the studio has done none of the steps above including not providing the bring-a-friend information).

These tips are meant to be the basic, everyday things you do for every customer, every time. If you skip these steps, or only do one of them, you will miss out on simple opportunities that are already available to you.

Would you add anything? If you are a service provider, what is your must-do marketing tip? Please share!

Coming up on Thursday, week 2 of the summer challenge.

The namaste guide to smart marketing

Namaste.

“The light in me honors the light in you.” That’s what *namaste* means in Sanskrit. It’s a beautiful greeting that is often used at the end of a yoga class (or sometimes at the beginning).

Good yoga teachers honor their students. They respect their limitations and seek to teach them to work with their bodies. What does this have to do with marketing? It’s simple. Like yoga teachers, good marketers honor their customers by getting to know them and understanding their needs and then customizing messages (and media) for the customers.

You should know that I have practiced yoga for more than ten years, and have been to many studios and had many teachers. I’ve been taking a break for the past couple years, but yesterday, I attended my first class in a long time at a new-to-me studio.

Not-so-good yoga teacher (no knowledge of

students)

The teacher walked in to the studio and although she smiled and said hello to me, she did not introduce herself or ask me my name or more importantly, any questions regarding my knowledge of yoga. She also did not ask the class as a whole if there were any injuries or issues she should be aware of. She started the class (late but that is another story) and pretty much assumed everybody understood everything, to the point she was using the Sanskrit terms for many of the poses. As I mentioned, it's been a while, and I did not recall the difference between *utrasana* (standing forward bend) and *utkatasana* (chair pose). Everybody seemed to be following, but I could not help but think a real beginner would be completely lost. And forget somebody with injuries although she did offer a few modifications (if your knee hurts, don't do this).

Much better yoga teacher (customizes teachings to students' needs)

Contrast her disinterest with another teacher I had at another studio. He wanted to know how much yoga I had practiced and if I had any physical limitations. I told him that my knee had been bothering me and he made a point of explaining what I could do differently and how to protect myself from injury or further pain. **He tailored his teaching to my needs.** Instead of telling me not to do something because it hurt, he offered alternative poses or different ways of doing the pose. He took into account the levels of knowledge in the class. It was very clear he wanted to teach yoga to people while honoring their bodies and their limitations (there is actually a Sanskrit term for this – *ahimsa*– to not injure).

Good yoga teachers work to understand students' limitations and then offer modifications. Good yoga teachers do not push students to do something that is not within their level of

practice. Good yoga teachers practice namaste –honoring others–by understanding those others.

Knowledge + customization = smart marketing

Smart marketers work hard to understand their customers. They know who and where their customers are and what they want and need. Then, with this knowledge, they tailor their marketing messages to the customer's needs.

Think about the last spam email you got. Perhaps you got an email about a “miracle” diet pill or getting listed in a mythical directory. You probably deleted those emails right away because those messages were not tailored to you. Spam marketers are not smart marketers. They are mass marketers. They send the same message to everyone and hope something sticks.

Honor your customers. Provide messages and offers that make sense for them.

Namaste.

What my gym's #fail can teach

you about marketing

At the gym this morning, we experienced a paper towel fail. There are two automated paper towel dispensers on the main floor, and both were out of paper. Since you are supposed to wipe your machine down after exercising (and some of us, knowing most people don't do that, wipe it down before), and people need the paper to do this, we could potentially be looking at many sweat and germ drenched machines.



Treadmills by Montage H0A
on Flickr

In any case, I got the last bit of paper out of one, and was able to wipe my machine and start exercising. After me, at least ten people walked up to the machines, waved at them fruitlessly and walked away. Most just left their machines without wiping them off. A couple of people walked over to the other room and got paper there. And then someone finally reported the missing paper to the front desk.

What is the marketing lesson here? There are three:

1. **Most people will not speak up.** It seems to be something about human psychology that most people will not rock the boat, even if something is wrong.

Marketers should never assume that because no one has said anything, everything is OK. That's why it's so important to

measure and check!

2. Most people will not go out of their way, even if they know they should do something. It may be laziness or hurry or something else, but most people will not take extra steps or go out of their way.

Marketers (especially of causes) have to make things as easy as possible. Too many steps will just make people give up.

3. People are completely self-involved. Most people don't notice what is going around them. If so, all those people would have seen there was no paper instead of standing there doing what another person did five seconds before them.

Marketers have to break through both the clutter and the self-involvement.

Comments are always appreciated!

Need help with your marketing materials? If so, contact me to discuss how we can cut through the clutter and make change happen.