

Scan Your Customer Instruments¹

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During these stressful economic times, it's more important than ever to listen to your customers, both external and internal. Let me explain by describing an eye-opening experience I had several years ago.

A colleague of mine was asked to assist the new General Manager of a large retail corporation in the planning of his first national manager meeting. It was an annual meeting attended by Corporate Officers and Regional Managers from across the country. In the past, these meetings had been very dull and one-sided—various Corporate Officers delivered lengthy presentations to a ballroom full of 175 managers, using slides full of numbers and reams of other tedious information. The presentations were one-way conversations, with little interaction from the audience. The new General Manager wanted this one to be different. He wanted to improve the meeting format to make it livelier, with more interaction between presenters and the audience.

My colleague and I decided to create a participatory atmosphere. We arranged several circular tables in a large oval pattern, like one giant boardroom table. Seated at each round table were all of the managers from a specific region plus a corporate manager. A keypad was placed in front of each person so he or she could give immediate feedback to multiple-choice questions asked by presenters. The feedback was then displayed on a large screen at the front of the ballroom, giving the group an immediate sense of how the majority felt about a particular issue.

Before the meeting, we coached each of the corporate managers scheduled to make presentations. Our goal was to help them design a presentation that not only conveyed the information they wanted to convey, but also to engage the audience in a dialogue by soliciting responses to questions and recommendations for actions from the table groups.

I remember one presenter in particular, the Vice President for Customer Relations, who dramatically demonstrated a point particularly important to all of us in business today. Another corporate officer had just finished a presentation and the audience was waiting for the VP to begin his.

Suddenly, at the back end of the large ballroom, far from the stage up front, the door opened and the VP entered. Wearing a Snoopy hat with goggles and holding a large model airplane in front of him, he wove his way through the collection of meeting tables up to the stage at the front, all the while making a roaring airplane noise like something his grandson might do. He ran up the stairs to the stage amid the laughter and cheers of his audience.

¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie's site: www.arniedahlke.com

“I bet you’re wondering if I’ve gone crazy!” he said to the laughing managers. “What some of you might not know is that I used to be a Northwest Airlines pilot. I was laid off back in the recession and I ended up working here.”

“When I became the VP for Customer Relations,” he continued, I remembered a very important lesson I learned when I was a pilot.” Raising his model airplane in the air and beginning to slowly spin around, he said, “We pilots are very careful about not going into what we call a dead spin. Let me explain what I mean by a dead spin.”

“There are some days the sky is so hazy that it’s difficult to tell where the horizon is. Everything around you is one big blanket of gray and you literally have a hard time knowing which way is up. If you don’t pay attention to your flight instruments to make sure you are flying level, you can dip your wings to one side. This will send you into a slow spin and your body won’t even know it because of the forces involved in the spin—you actually feel like you’re flying straight and normal.”

“If you continue not to scan your flight instruments,” the VP continued, spinning faster as he talked, “you will descend rapidly into a spin that you cannot change, and you will end up smashing into the ground!” At this point, he twirled his model airplane and himself down to the floor of the stage.

“Now you can see why we pilots call this a *dead spin*,” he said to his laughing audience.

He placed the model on the stage and removed his Snoopy hat. Looking at the audience, he became serious, “The only way you can avoid a *dead spin* is to *continually scan your instruments*,” he said.

He paused for a moment and then continued. “Here in our organization, the various kinds of feedback I get from our customers make up my ‘instruments.’ Surveys, complaints, compliments, focus groups—these are the ways I discover what’s on their minds and their perceptions of us.² I know that if we as an organization do not constantly pay attention to what our customers say and, most important, adjust what we do to give them support and what they want, we will fail in the long run. We will go into a *dead spin*!”

What that VP was talking about then holds truer than ever during these stressful economic times. Feedback from our customers tells us how we are doing with them and what we have to change to give them what they want. Even more importantly, we learn what we can give them that will exceed their expectations! The result will not only be loyal repeating customers, but also a source of referrals to new customers, which will grow our business.

In short, customers will give us valuable ideas that will help us determine how to cope with present times.

And, here’s a very important point: it isn’t only the *external* customers who will give you helpful feedback. It is also your *internal* customers³, the people responsible for your business performance.

Every person in your organization is a feedback instrument. The people on the front lines of your business know what’s going on. The people in the boiler room know what works and what’s not working, and what would work better.

Pay attention to every customer—internal *and* external! Actively seek them out and listen to and understand what they have to say. Particularly listen to their suggestions for strategies and actions that will keep your business thriving instead of simply surviving. When your internal customers bring up problems, make it your job to fully understand their problems and engage them in a collaborative effort to solve them.

Look at every customer as a valuable resource for the success of your business.

In other words, continually ***Scan Your Customer Instruments!***

² See *Customer Exit Surveys* and *Focus Groups* at www.arniedahlke.com/onsiteprog5.htm and www.arniedahlke.com/onsiteprog6.htm

³ See *Create A Customer-Driven Mindset* at www.arniedahlke.com/standard5.htm