
10 Tips for Encouraging Customer Advocacy

The following tips on were presented on June 8, 2011 to senior marketing and sales executives at the Enterprise Council on Small Business Summit. These 10 Tips for Encouraging Customer Advocacy do not require a full-fledged customer advocacy program in order to be implemented. My intent with these tips is to provide businesses of all sizes actionable ideas on how to better connect with current customers knowing that happy loyal customers result in a business attracting new customers which fuels future success.

#1 | Customer Advocacy begins first with Employee Advocacy

If a company wants long-lasting relationships with customers it needs to first develop long-lasting relationships with employees. Why? Simply put, a jazzed employee will jazz customers. That is, a passionate and knowledgeable employee will pass on that enthusiasm and knowledge to customers. An employee who is trusted and empowered to deliver great customer service will do just that. If a company fails to celebrate and champion its employees, then it will never be able to celebrate and champion its customers.

#2 | Use Photos of REAL Customers in your Marketing Materials

Stop using stock photography of “customers.” Instead, feature your happiest, most satisfied, and most evangelical customers in your marketing materials. Celebrate your best customers by showcasing them in ways other current or potential customers can relate to and aspire to become. This is easy and inexpensive to do online by sharing photos and testimonials of happy customers online through your website, Facebook page, and Twitter stream. While its easy to do, it’s a difficult decision that more companies should consider making if they are truly a customer-first business.

#3 | Have your CEO call Five Customers a week to Say “Thank You.”

File this idea under “Surprise and Delight.” Imagine a customer receiving a voicemail message from the CEO of a company they do business with. Now imagine how many people this person will tell about the voicemail. For a B2B customer, consider how many times this voicemail will get forwarded within the company. This idea is a simple way to show customers a big company values the “small” people responsible for making the company a success.

#4 | Have your CEO call Five Front-Line Employees a week to Say “Thank You.”

Again, imagine how many other employees will hear this message. Imagine the pride an employee will have from having a voice-to-voice conversation with the CEO. It’s a simple but powerful way to show an employee a big company values the “small” people responsible for connecting with customers at the moment of truth—the point of sale.

#5 | Create an Informal Customer Advisory Panel

Once a quarter, invite five to ten customers out to lunch. And during lunch, ask them questions about how your business could better meet their needs. Show them a product or a program that is in development and ask them for their on-the-spot feedback. Most importantly, listen to what your

customers are telling you and listen for the things your customers aren't telling you. Developing informal relationships with customers and between customers can lead to greater advocacy by customers.

#6 | Invite Loyal Customers to Spend a Day at Company Headquarters

Find your most evangelical/loyal customers and invite them to spend a day at HQ learning more about company. Treat them like royalty. Give them access to important people inside the company. Show them the R&D department. Show them prototypes. Give them schwag. Make them feel special. Surprise them. Delight them. Celebrate them. And reward them... not with discounts but with priceless experiences that the ordinary customer would NEVER get to experience.

#7 | Make your Company's Competitive Advantage about Customer Service

Competitors can replicate your products and programs but they will never be able to replicate your company's culture. The only truly proprietary aspect of a company is its culture. And a culture that is based on delivering excellent customer service every moment of every day will allow a company to prosper in good economic times and hold steady in bad economic times.

#8 Casually Prod Customers for Referrals and Recommendations

Having a good product/service that satisfies customers is the ante to being in business. Bad products and bad customer service will not allow a company to last long. If you feel like your business delivers something beyond a good product/service then ask your customers to tell others. There's a local burger joint in Austin, TX that sells an outstanding burger with outstanding customer service. They know it. They know it because a sign every customer sees when they leave the place says, "Don't tell us how good we are, just tell your friends." Can you be as confident to ask your customers for a referral?

#9 | Provide More. Promote Less.

The brands that are nurturing meaningful relationships with customers online aren't interrupting them with promotional messages on Twitter or Facebook. Instead, brands like Whole Foods and Starbucks are using Twitter and Facebook to provide customers with more information about products/services. 90% of tweets from Starbucks and Whole Foods are "@" someone, responding directly to someone's comment. Starbucks and Whole Foods Facebook pages aren't littered with promotional status updates. Instead, these brands are taking a moment to make a moment with customers by providing them specific information. This isn't the sexiest way to use social media but it's been very effective for Starbucks and Whole Foods to develop evangelical customers.

10. Buzz does not create evangelists. Evangelists create buzz.

Generating buzz may create awareness about a brand, but it will be evangelists and advocates that will keep the buzz alive. My final tip is to think long-term and not short-term when creating a Customer Advocacy Program. In fact, don't even think of it as a program with a begin and end date. Customer Advocacy is an every day business issue. True Customer Advocacy is not a one-off marketing activity, it's an every day business necessity.
