

Achieving Customer Satisfaction with Learning

By Kevin Oakes, CEO of i4cp

With forward by Sam Herring, CEO Intrepid Learning, Inc.



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Learning and customer satisfaction are two absolute requisites for business success. But a number of companies don't fully understand the delicate – yet direct – relationship between these two crucial variables.

In the following article, however, Kevin Oakes, CEO of the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp), the world's largest vendor-free network of corporations focused on building and sustaining highly productive, high-performance organizations, explains this all-important linkage.

Indeed, Oakes talks about how companies can set up and implement teaching and training programs for customers in order to engender trust and loyalty while fortifying long-term revenue streams at the same time.

From our perspective, this is a must read. And we hope you gain useful insight and meaningful intelligence from Oakes' sage thinking.

Learning can become one of the most profitable enterprise activities over time because of the way it helps companies of all sizes, in most industries, achieve the highest possible levels of customer satisfaction.

The critical connective tissue between learning and customer satisfaction is trust. How do organizations build trust? Trust typically takes hold when organizations offer the extended value chain – clients, suppliers, distributors, and other strategic partners – teaching and training programs that not only help to fully explain their products and services, but that also offer clients and partners ample opportunity to improve their own business acumen and performance.

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Most companies still spend the bulk of their training dollars internally, on their workforce. But by pushing learning out to external audiences, a growing number of firms are finding that, in addition to trust, they can engender tremendous customer loyalty. And loyalty translates into additional business – and a huge competitive advantage in the marketplace – for years to come.

There are many case studies that reinforce the positive financial impact customer training and education can have. In a previous article I wrote on this subject, I highlighted three that caught my attention:

Harley Davidson has been providing retail and management training – in addition to technical learning – to its dealer network for about 20 years. One study examining the influence that this teaching had on dealer performance found that dealership sales increased by an average of \$88,000 over a three-year period for every employee a dealer sent to general merchandising training.

For its part, Fidelity Investments has employed contextual, blended and adaptive e-learning programs to teach end users about its many benefit plans. As a result, one study found that customers' comfort level in investing increased from 58% to 65%. In addition, newly eligible participants were two and one-half times more likely to enroll in their company retirement plan.

And Symantec, a global leader in enterprise information security, helped teach companies how to meet the regulatory requirements for employee security awareness training. Symantec's year-long training – which provided a series of computer-based tutorials and ready-to-print pamphlets, reference cards, screen savers, and other resources – tracked employee participation and performance, and was designed to increase security knowledge and influence appropriate employee behavior at all levels of the workforce.



Each of these companies has a focus on the customer, the hallmark of a high-performing learning organization that achieves strong customer satisfaction scores and robust revenues and profits. Indeed, a recent research survey by my company, i4cp, indicates that 79% of high-performing companies believe they exist primarily to serve customers and 65% say they are driven primarily by customer satisfaction levels. But helping a customer become more educated about a company's products and services sets the bar even higher, and consequently engenders higher customer loyalty.

A new generation of tools and technologies is making these customer-centric training efforts even richer than in the past.

Social learning solutions are especially well suited to the task because they allow the customer to help create the content. And, based on my experience with social learning, I have found that customer-generated content is often developed more rapidly and considered more credible than content that stems exclusively from the company.

In addition, companies that offer social learning tools to customers are usually more likely to embrace sharing, which is a key component of durable customer relationships and strong customer satisfaction. Because of their dynamic and multi-stream information and content flows, social learning solutions help companies move more quickly and responsively to solve customer problems. Picture a call center, for example, where responding to a troubled product expeditiously and getting phone representatives up to speed in a hurry is absolutely essential.

The focus on learning initiatives that develop, refine and reinforce customer satisfaction with the employee base is not a new phenomenon. GE, under former CEO Jack Welch, figured this out a long time ago; and so did Motorola, which created the first corporate university. But today, companies like Amazon and Zappos, for example, have significantly upped the intellectual stakes by making learning that enhances customer satisfaction a critical business objective and prime organizational goal.

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Amazon is a good benchmark to follow since the company consistently garners awards for being tops in customer service. A big reason is the emphasis Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos puts on customer service. To illustrate its importance, Bezos reportedly keeps an empty chair next to him at his executive team meetings. The chair represents the customer, and it reminds the Amazon executive team that they must always keep the buyer in mind with each decision they make, and engage in a mutually educational dialogue with their customers each and every day in order to keep them happy and purchasing on a consistent basis.

Customer satisfaction is more important than ever today because consumers have an increasing array of choices. Technical innovations have increased brand awareness and made switching brands much easier, as Groupon's meteoric success shows. People will simply look for the best deal, at the best price.

That said, given shaky budgets and the still uncertain state of the economy, there is a risk that customer-training programs will shrink. And that's why I believe companies need to develop a value-based approach to this process.

This is imperative, because our research at i4cp shows that companies often tout their customer centricity, yet many fail to emphasize customer-focused practices like training and education. And, frankly, never have we been more ready or better equipped than we are right now to apply learning as a customer satisfaction lever.

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Say they are driven primarily by customer satisfaction levels

In fact, Sam Herring at Intrepid Learning believes we are experiencing a technology renaissance that is creating new and exciting possibilities for learning and its ability to enhance organizational performance. This learning renaissance in Herring's view manifests itself in expanding access to learning experiences; heightened speed and instancy of learning; new possibilities for learning in groups and through immersive multimedia learning experiences; deeper analytics around learner behavior; and the ability of social and collaborative solutions to solve the enterprise learning challenge.

I agree that these are exciting times; but be wary of underestimating the effort it takes to apply learning well. Using training and education to create high-performance, customer-centric cultures requires thoughtful planning, expert implementation and an aggressive approach to managing change. But, if the experience of companies who've "been there and done that" holds true, your efforts will be rewarded.

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