

Customer-Driven Quality

A customer's perception of value and satisfaction begins with an initial purchase and continues throughout the actual ownership and the overall service experience. Regardless of whether the perception is positive or negative, a customer's thoughts and desires will influence what the company provides as it strives to maintain a healthy relationship with customers. This relationship can build trust, confidence, and loyalty from the customer to the company providing it is meeting or exceeding customer expectations. This relationship is referred to as customer-driven quality. Customer-driven quality addresses not only product and service characteristics of a company, but it also includes those features that differentiate products and services from competing companies. Customer-driven quality is important to companies when trying to exceed customer expectations, developing awareness to changing market trends, and keeping up with technological advances. The only way for a company to sell its products is to understand what the customer needs and expects. The company then has to provide that product or service in an exceptional way to meet and hopefully to surpass customers expectations.

Providing superior customer service and quality is vital to having success in any business. The company must look at the world through the eyes of the customers to understand what they desire. Exceeding customer expectations is when a company provides a product or service beyond the expectation of the customer. A customer is prone to buying a product from a company again when it appears that the company has surpassed customer expectations. For example, Wal-Mart Inc. one of the most profitable companies in the world, attributes exceeding customer expectation to the deceased CEO and company founder, Sam Walton. Many years ago, Wal-Mart started gaining market

share over the competition because of Sam Walton's principles regarding customer expectation. Sam Walton quotes, "Let's be the most friendly - offer a smile of welcome and assistance to all who do us a favor by entering our stores. Give better service - over and beyond what our customers expect. Why not? You wonderful, caring associates can do it and do it better than any other retailing company in the world . . . exceed your customers' expectations. If you do, they'll come back over and over again." Sam Walton used proactive customer-driven quality to anticipate customer needs and to satisfy those needs as soon as they walked into a store. Wal-Mart's assurance to surpassing customer expectations makes customers want to come back to their stores again. This belief of Sam Walton's helped make Wal-Mart Inc. the number one retailer in the world and has guaranteed the happiness of many loyal customers who return to his stores.

Developing awareness of changing market trends is important to knowing the likes and dislikes of customers. Not only do customers change their tastes from year to year, they also change from season to season. It is important for companies to always have direct contact with their markets to determine product specifications. When companies do not pay attention to changing trends they find themselves to be "out-of-style" or "out-dated". When this happens, it is distasteful to the customer and they tend to find more contemporary products from other companies. Every type of company must keep up with changing trends, but this is especially critical for the viability of clothing retailers. Gap Inc. is a company that has always created their clothing merchandises to be in line with the fashion trends in today's culture. Gap Inc. states, "Gap Inc. is a blend of a dynamic, fast-paced culture, respect for diversity and a strong support of the communities where we live and do business. At Gap Inc., we are dedicated and talented

employees that deliver the merchandise and shopping experience our customers expect and deserve.” Knowing and understanding changing market trends has made Gap Inc. a lucrative and contemporary company in the apparel market.

Awareness of developments in technology is important to keeping up with the changing times in our society. Technology is growing at a rapid pace with new advances happening everyday. Making rapid and flexible responses to customers and market requirements makes a company viable and capable to its customers. Technology is responding to the wants of customers through futuristic ideas and notions of products. It is getting harder for companies to keep abreast of changes in technology, but the companies that attempt to understand new technologies have resulted in improved success. Sony Inc. is among the leading audio-visual electronics and information technology companies in the U.S. and worldwide. This is accredited to keeping up with the ever-changing needs in today’s world. Sony has strived to meet customer-driven quality by listening to what the customer wants. Sony was not the first to develop many of the electronics we use today, but they were the first to listen to the customer and make electronics miniaturized for portability. This concept of miniaturization is immense to our society, and it helped to make Sony one of the leading electronic companies. Sony used a type of customer-driven quality called response to customer requirements. This can also be called reactive customer-driven quality. Reactive customer-driven quality helped Sony Inc. become an admired and profitable company by combining technology and customers demands.

There are many different ways a company can institute customer-driven quality into a company. Using different methods of communicating with customers can assist a

company in knowing what a customer wants in a product. One example of communicating with customers is called planned customer-driven quality. Planned customer-driven quality uses focus groups and surveys to find out what customers want and expect from a product. This helps a company know the expectations of the customer before facilitating a product into the market. Planned customer-driven quality can prevent the dissatisfactions of customers before they happen. Dissatisfaction can still occur if quality is not a focus of the company and defects happen in the production of the product. When dissatisfactions happen, reactive customer-driven quality results. Reactive customer-driven quality, as previously mentioned, happens as a result of responding to customer needs. This helps correct the dissatisfaction that customers experience with products and gives the company advice on how they can improve them.

To find out more about customer-driven quality, there are many resources on the Internet and at some company web sites. Most major business companies that deal directly with the public and have a web site usually have a statement about the importance of the consumer opinions. Also, either on web sites or at the establishments, there usually are customer service cards where a customer can give feedback about improving the product or service.

The three examples shown of different companies show how important it is to understanding customer-driven quality. Customer-driven quality is so crucial to a company's position in the market and its overall performance. Quality must account for all product and service features that contribute value to the customer and to their satisfaction and retention. Understanding customer-driven quality can help prevent

excess cost and unsatisfied customers. Using different practices of communicating with the customers can ensure a viable and profitable company.