

*YOUR BUSINESS*

## **Customer service is the new marketing**

*JAMES WATSON*

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About 2,500 years ago, Socrates said, "The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear." Beverage choices aside, Socrates was a wise man.

His lesson is that our everyday actions have a greater impact on our brand and reputations than the words we speak, or the marketing campaigns we broadcast. It's these everyday actions that cause customers to love us or to hate us, and to want to tell the entire world how they feel about us.

Although word-of-mouth has always been considered the most credible form of promotion, it's lacked the speed and reach of the traditional marketing mediums. As businesses with marketing resources, we've always had the advantage of reaching a larger audience more quickly. In other words, corporate marketing controlled the message that was heard throughout the marketplace.

But new Internet technology has virtually taken that advantage away from the corporation and given it to the customers. Social networks such as YouTube, MySpace and a growing number of others enable the consumer to broadcast their own message about us to millions of potential customers, literally overnight.

Who remembers Vincent Ferrari? He was a customer of America Online who called AOL in June 2006 to cancel his unused account. Despite his repeated pleas, the AOL rep refused to cancel the account, and a frustrated Ferrari posted a recording of the call on the Internet.

Within days, the tape was heard by millions of people. And within days, AOL's business tactics were publicly criticized, and its subscriber base plummeted.

The social networks of today's Internet have given the customer an enormous amount of control over the public's perception of a company -- control they've never had before. The advice that Socrates offered would be very timely in today's MBA curricula.

Socrates' wisdom tells us that as companies, we should make sure that the things we do that are seen and felt by our customers are aligned with the image that we wish to project. Sure, that's common sense. But like a lot of common sense, it's violated every day.

And given the consumers' new power to broadcast our violations to the masses, we vendors have a much lower margin for error when it comes to pleasing our clients.

So technology is once again causing us to rethink some areas of business -- this time it's marketing and customer service. So what are some of the changes we should consider in response to the powerful new voice of the customer?

First, get your customer service house in order. Understand each of your customer touch points -- those points where a customer interacts with your company. No matter how insignificant a point of contact might appear, it contributes to the opinion that the customer forms about your company and can share with the marketplace.

How "client-friendly" are these touch points in your company? Are they designed for your own internal efficiency and ease of doing business, or are they designed to make your customer's life easier? Be honest. If unsure, ask your customers. Change a process to make it more friendly to customers.

Second, get involved in social networking. If your customers are going to talk about you, you might as well be present to hear what they're saying.

In fact, even better if you can host the party, by creating an online forum where your clients can discuss issues related to your products or services, and their overall experience with you as a vendor. Use these opportunities to understand your customers' concerns, respond to them openly and make your customers' lives easier.

How you treat your customers on a daily basis is rapidly becoming the basis for your reputation. It's no longer just marketing that controls the message -- it's your customers, according to how you serve them.

Simply stated, customer service is the new marketing.

*James Watson is a founding partner of Presentations That Stick. Presentations That Stick helps companies acquire customers and generate revenue by designing and delivering powerful presentations on site, over the Internet, or in a recorded format. To learn more, go to [www.presentationsthatstick.com](http://www.presentationsthatstick.com) email [jwatson@presentationsthatstick.com](mailto:jwatson@presentationsthatstick.com) or call 207.741.9047.*