

YOUR BUSINESS: *James Watson*

Maximize opportunities to make a good impression

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You never get a second chance to make a first impression. And you never get a second chance to make a second impression, or a third, fourth or fifth.

Every time a customer comes in contact with your company, their impression of you either gets better or worse. There are no neutral impressions.

Therefore, you should do everything possible to assure that each interaction a customer has with your business increases your standing in the mind of that customer.

Impressions collectively form the customer's attitude toward your company, and that attitude drives their behavior. Great customer experiences create value for the customer, and ultimately, value for your company.

So how do you create great customer experiences? First, identify every instance in which a customer may have contact with your company. These points of contact, or "touch points," occur in various stages of the customer life cycle.

There are pre-sales touch points where the customer is on the receiving end of marketing activities. Through what channels do you market to your potential customers? E-mail, direct mail, trade shows, print? What message do you deliver through those channels and how is it received by the prospect?

During the various stages of the sales process, your sales people are creating very definite impressions on the potential customer. Do you have a well-defined sales process and is it orchestrated to address the customers' needs? Are your sales people trained to execute the process consistently and professionally?

There are post-sale processes including product delivery and customer service. When a product or service is delivered to a new client for the first time, do you make the delivery a memorable "event" for the new client, instilling in them an excitement for their new business relationship? Is every customer service interaction handled to make the customer feel like they are your most important client?

There are other touch points that are often overlooked because they don't directly involve a person-to-person interaction. Examples include instances when a customer is required to navigate the menu on your phone system or complete a product registration form or survey.

When your client is subject to one of these activities, do they receive a positive or negative impression of you? Do they perceive the process to be easy or cumbersome? Remember, everything either adds to or detracts from their impression of your company.

Once you've identified all of the customer touch points in your business, look at each touch point from the customer's perspective. Does it drive a positive or negative impression? Be honest. If you're not sure, ask some of your customers what they think.

If a touch point leaves a negative impression, change the process around that touch point so that it leaves a positive impression. If you can't make it positive, consider eliminating the touch point altogether rather than risk leaving a negative impression.

Once you've identified every potential place and reason that a customer can come in contact with your company and you've carefully engineered a process to convert those opportunities into reputation enhancers, you need to train your employees to learn the processes and execute each one flawlessly and consistently.

If a well-designed process is executed poorly, the entire plan can backfire and leave the customer with a negative impression of your organization. Don't just assume that your employees "get it." Training is critical. Be sure your customer-facing employees know what to do and why they should be doing it.

Customer touch points are opportunities to continually strengthen your company's relationships with your clients and enhance the reputation of your company. In a world where products are more easily commoditized, the intangibles such as consistent service and a positive experience will generate additional value for your customers and ultimately greater value for your company.

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