

# Please Me Now

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Customers are an increasingly hard audience to please and brands may have to apply some tough love. Have we found the right balance in the relationship?

Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Laureate and the father of behaviour economic theory, described a principle he named The Customer Satisfaction Treadmill. The faster we get it, the faster we want it. The more convenient it becomes, the more we realise just how convenient it could be. The more our unreasonable demands are met, the more unreasonable they become.

Every time you go out of your way to please a customer you are adding weight to creating unreasonable demand. But it doesn't have to be this way: there has never been a need for IKEA to include a carpenter in its flat packs. Because we have been trained in regards to

what we expect from IKEA.

An important force that shapes brand strategy today is the threat of substitute products or services, according to Professor Michael E. Porter from Harvard University. This factor leads business managers to believe that loyalty should be bought and included in automated programmes. With the entrance of the social net where the individual voice suddenly becomes visible, real-time support has become the latest trend. But how smart is it to “be there, everywhere” for the customer? And what is the purpose?

## Unstructured data

When someone shouts out into thin air via Twitter, that something is wrong with your service or product, and you reply without thinking through all the consequences and possible snowball effects, you are about to embark on a dangerous trail.

Are you really ready to fulfil that demand? Are you going to be there for the customer, mountain high and valley wide? If not, you'd better not please every whim that the customers express via these new social channels. Because most likely my barking has no specific aim. It is more often than not, an attempt to get attention from my surroundings, not you (the product) specifically. I am saying you suck because I want recognition from my friends. It is a modern game of “forget me not”. You just happen to be the content.

Many brands are now using Facebook as a customer service platform. Ask yourself what the purpose and consequence might be. Airline companies that deliver personal flight services on Facebook are in fact creating a feeling of a personal assistance that is massively missing when they get to airport and on the actual flight.

As a secondary effect is that their Facebook wall ends up as spam since everything is about 1:1 experience. They have lost a good tool for communication to many people in their attempt to satisfy their customers' imagined needs. Brands that take this route are repeatedly solving the same problems over and over because the answer is not available as a simple query for the customer. Most questions are repetitive and basic. Things consumers should be able to find in a good database. A good structured database. So the

same message doesn't have to be sent hundred times to different people on the same wall.

## Get satisfaction?

Even worse. You train your customers that they can shout in the woods and be heard.

There are online platforms that actually help customers without creating increased demands on the brand.

Getsatisfaction.com, a community-based support platform, gives fans of companies and their staff a place to share their knowledge of certain products or services so the pressure on customer support decreases. Swedish music service Spotify has done this with great success. Spotify's customer community routinely receives more than 100.000 visitors per week. This traffic provides support to Spotify's 10 million registered users, and helps the Spotify team remain lean despite an exploding customer base.

## Random acts of kindness

Treadmilling isn't only about support. It is first and foremost about creating situations where expectations are adjusted without a specific purpose or strategy. Business owners tend to spend more time looking for threats than opportunities. Jumping if the angry Twitter mob says their new logo is ugly. Considering the general public's level of knowledge the process of logo creation I am certain that one should be cautious about making such decisions based on ephemeral popular demand.

Here is what a good business leader should do. Monitor and track conversations on the web with a suitable social analytics tool. Acknowledge the frustration on the subject publicly. Find out if the 99,99% of customers who did not join the mob like your logo or not. Ask your employees. If the logo is liked by the silent majority, then fight for them. That will earn respect from the mob over time. And give you something to talk to fans about: The actual reasons why you run the business the way you do. By having an open and honest strategy most critique will most likely become an asset.

This is what happened when JetBlue (not an airline, but a happy jetting company) left many passengers in a horrible situation during a blizzard some years ago. The angry mob went ballistic on Twitter, media picked it up, and the company's CEO put on the mad hat and made a YouTube video. He gave a public apology but most importantly he made a promise on how JetBlue would deal with similar problems in the future.

The next thing JetBlue did was make sure that all staff members tried really hard to make every passenger feel special. Not by replying on customer service matters on Facebook. They actually state pretty clearly that they don't respond to specific customer service issues posted on this platform. Instead they perform random acts of kindness; like staff members performing as an a cappella band at their JFK Terminal, or instantly making their Caribbean flights freely available for rescue workers from the US when the terrible earthquake hit the islands in 2010.

Real human attention gives your employees the power to become autonomic. This is how you make true champions of positive customer satisfaction. Loyalty programmes, and similar schemes, don't work as well as the human touch because they create expectancy. When customers start to expect gifts or bonuses they don't value them as highly anymore. It is bought loyalty. We are running on the customer satisfaction treadmill.

## **Take it to the C level**

Customer service can be immensely powerful for a brand if used correctly. Just ask Tony Hsieh of Zappos.com, the CEO who built the world's largest online shoe store by delivering happiness. To really understand the value of customer service as an asset, all Zappos.com's employees are obliged to attend customer service training in two of their first four weeks of work, regardless of department and position.

All employees are expected to drive a wow-effect through service. To make a lasting impression you must do something above and beyond what's expected. Make someone smile. But Zappos staff do this over the phone. Not via 140 characters or less. Seeing a problem online does not mean it must be solved online.

The more I research customer service, the more important the human factor becomes. This is about humanising the brand or company. Our power as customers via the social net will affect the business strategy of the core business. This needs to be understood by the C-suite, the CEO and his friends up there. If they don't see any danger in automating satisfaction in measurable programmes or being present without understanding why, for us the customers, treadmilling will continue. That was key to the success of Zappos. com. Delivering happiness came from the CEO. It was a core element of the strategy.

It is possible to love data and show some love to the customer simultaneously. But only when a clear business motivated strategy is in place, and not without a clear understanding of what tools to use. Being service minded and making sure that you help your customer is very important. But know when, where and how. Why and with what isn't such a bad idea either.

So if you want to please me now, I don't mind. But I didn't expect you to, before you just did so. And now my expectations just went up a notch. Good luck.

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