



<http://www.mycustomer.com/topic/customer-experience/customer-advocacy-marriage-made-heaven/123457>

How to get your customers to commit to an 'advocacy marriage'

Posted by Daniel Bausor in [Customer experience](#) on Mon, 04/04/2011 - 02:37



One-dimensional, siloed customer reference programmes are being consigned to history. Customer advocacy heralds a new dawn in customer-led marketing – quite literally, letting customers do the talking!

Tougher economic times have forced marketers to get back to basics and put the customer back at the heart of marketing where they should always be. At the same time, Web 2.0 has completely broken down the silos of communication with the customer where they have multiple information sources on the web and with social media to aid them in their buying process. This requires a radical and holistic approach to the customer's relationship with a brand. The relationship is like a marriage – it works best when there are shared values and both partners benefit. This can lead to customers literally doing the talking for you across multiple channels: from video to speaking opportunities, social media and the press. Customer advocacy is heralded as the new dawn to facilitate this new approach but what is it and why does it matter?

Before the last two years of economic turmoil, the relationship between the customer and organisations has been a loveless marriage. It became a one-way relationship, where customers were taken for granted in many cases. Organisations lost sight of the value in the propositions that customers bought into in the first place, and as a result service slipped. Integral to this relationship breakdown was that all too often, it was about tactical activity. Also, customers were 'communicated to' but not 'communicated with', i.e. there was no listening to what customers wanted with a two-way dialogue.

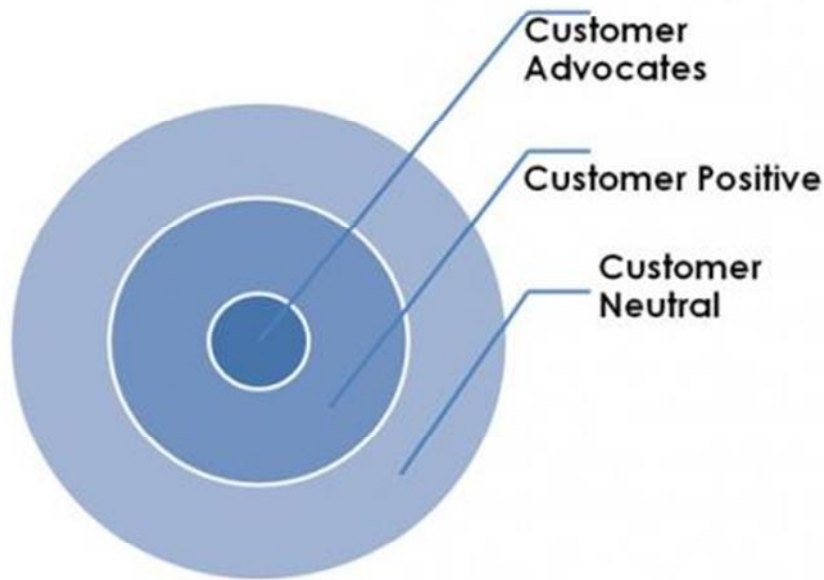
Customer advocacy is the new marketing specialism all about nurturing the customer as an 'advocate' for your organisation and brand. The definition of an advocate is a person who supports or pleads for or on behalf of another. Another definition I like, is 'a person who recommends publicly'. If the customer is prepared to do this and stand above the parapet for you, it speaks volumes to customer prospects and other audiences. With a 'customer advocate', the relationship between the organisation and the customer has been developed to such an extent, that the customer has an emotional attachment where they feel strongly enough to 'recommend publicly'. This opens the door to multiple benefits in what can be a very fruitful and rewarding relationship. Furthermore, this leaves the old-fashioned, view of a one-dimensional, one-off 'customer reference' such as the printed case study, standing out in the cold.

In our experience, we see three levels of customer in this customer advocacy courtship. We start with 'customer neutral' in the scenario where the customer buys occasionally from you but has an ambivalent attitude towards your organisation and brand. The second level is 'customer positive' where the customer is buying several products/services and has a positive attitude towards you but it's a passive relationship. Think of it almost like an acquaintance, where you'll meet and listen to the person but most probably you wouldn't want to go on a night out with them. My point here is that you have the customer's attention as they are listening to the organisation.

If it is a strategic customer and is part of your long-term growth strategy, you should nurture the relationship so they become an advocate to benefit you both.

This brings me to the highest level of 'customer advocate' where the customer buys multiple products/services. They have a strong emotional attachment to your organisation and brand. They will commit to a 'customer advocacy marriage' and will act on your behalf. This is what all organisations should strive for with their customers, because it offers limitless possibilities for both partners in terms of increased brand awareness, profitability and market share.

DIAGRAM: 'The Customer Advocacy Courtship: three levels of customer advocacy'



Source: Famous4Communications 2010 ©

Virgin Media Business is one organisation that has adopted customer advocacy. The UK telco is looking to capitalise on the Virgin brand by delivering great customer service and leveraging its unique asset: the UK's only nationwide fibre optic network. As a result, the company is taking a holistic approach to nurturing customer advocates and working with them on joint marketing programmes.

A key element is to look at how to balance the need to map customers on to your business plan and gain their endorsement while consulting on and supporting the customers' own business and marketing goals. It's what we call 'mutual marketing currency' and is often overlooked but is immensely powerful. Sometimes the customer wants to raise the profile of the particular project or programme in their industry or their own personal profile. Conversely, it can be simply to raise awareness of their own organisation's brand.

Where Virgin Media Business has been successful is having a very targeted approach of telling customers' stories in multiple ways, from video through to speaking opportunities, to reach the target audience. For example, the chief information officer (CIO) of Countrywide, the UK's largest property services group recounted his story for **CIO magazine** in a press interview in the magazine as well as a video for their website. What was different was that it was far more than a generic case study; it talked about the challenges and issues from the viewpoint of a CIO to fellow CIOs.

It was both a real and compelling story, telling how Countrywide used IT to consolidate different business divisions, which was why the publication chose to report on it. This was valuable to Countrywide, as it helped educate on how IT was supporting the transformation of the business as well as reducing costs. Equally, Virgin Media Business benefited through Countrywide as a customer telling their story to CIO magazine. The magazine is very influential in reaching other CIOs and is just one example of customer advocacy integrated and measured as part of Virgin Media Business' broader marketing programme.

Increasingly in a Web 2.0 world, customers have far greater access to information and multiple channels to create a dialogue with organisations using social media, whether individually or through groups with a common interest. This shift from 'expectation' to 'experience marketing' has far reaching implications. Most importantly, organisations need to work with customers like partners in a marriage, i.e. in a more strategic way for the long-term. If you do this and work at it, it will be a customer advocacy marriage made in heaven!

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