We Hear You! How Companies Respond to User Feedback

In a struggling economy, the quest for companies to provide products that meet or exceed consumer expectations has become a matter of survival. That's part of the reason why more brands are using social media tools to obtain customer feedback, which then can be used to improve products and services.

Before the rise of Twitter, Facebook, and online blogs, in-person focus groups provided much-needed insight into a product or brand. Now, companies can immediately see what people are saying about their products.

“The internet is the world's largest instant focus group,” according to Elaine Boxer, senior vice president of marketing strategy at MTS/Quality Health. She states that social monitoring tools provide some of the most honest and revealing feedback, because they capture spontaneous expressions of what customers are thinking.

After reviewing such customer feedback via focus groups and on Twitter, Domino's Pizza decided it was time for a change that led to a reinvention not only for its pizza but also the company's image. Company spokesperson Chris Brandon says, “as evidenced by our 'Oh Yes We Did' website at pizzaturnaround.com — as well as our current ad campaign — our approach to consumers of honesty and transparency is 100% inspired by the feedback received from them.”

Every consumer has a voice and it's in the best interest of a company to hear each of them out, Brandon says, whether they are current or prospective customers. This often results in companies continually seeking user feedback.

Endora Todd, a 2004 Business Administration graduate of South University — Montgomery, backs up this assertion, adding that "an organization should never be comfortable or complacent within its space in the market.” She adds that in order to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage, a firm should aggressively obtain feedback and act on the responses accordingly.

"Surveys, personal interviews, and focus groups should be a part of the quality enhancement plan/strategy (QEP) of all organizations. These types of information gathering techniques serve as a microscope that peers into the soul of the firm; showing the good, bad, and ugly of the company," she states.

Some businesses do not have the resources to continually engage focus groups or directly solicit feedback. So these firms might seek input from customers with the introduction of a new product or if they happen to start receiving an influx of user commentary.

Many businesses decide to go down this path when feedback is consistent and in high volume, or if it comes from a diverse set of customer segments, says Boxer of MTS/Quality Health. Depending on the type of feedback, companies use different strategies to handle the input. Damaging product feedback, such as a parent stating that a company's toy has caused harm to a child, should elicit swift action and reflect crisis management principles. "The company should reveal and address this feedback right away, and not wait for the feedback to show up on blogs and then get picked up by the mainstream press," Boxer states. Less time-sensitive feedback can be analyzed and potentially acted upon when time and resources permit.

Responding to feedback quickly can help to build customer loyalty and reinforce a company's brand. Brandon, the spokesman for Domino's Pizza, explains that his company's goal was for its pizza and taste perception to match Domino's existing high levels of delivery and service. "So we went to work and developed a new pizza we are very proud to stand behind."

Building a strong relationship with customers is critical in maintaining and growing a customer base. Dave Heilman, chief operating officer of the healthy living website SparkPeople, adds that responding to feedback is essential. "(Our users) know we want to help them reach their goals by improving the site."

This relationship benefits both parties, he states, because happy users "want to help us, and their friends, by telling their friends about SparkPeople."

Heilman gathers feedback by actively posing questions to the website’s online community. The company also has a designated team of over 4,000 members who oversee the community, providing a sounding board for insight and requests for change. “We run surveys to our members about once a quarter,
asking specific questions about potential features and also have some open ended questions for members to give suggestions," he adds.

To determine the value of this input, SparkPeople documents how often certain feedback is given by different people. Because the company's product deals with healthy living, feedback is also discussed with experts such as dietitians and personal trainers. Finally, relevant feedback is analyzed to determine how long it will take to implement - and how great of an impact it will have on members.

Listening closely to informed feedback is good business.

“There could be some very valuable insights in such feedback that could point the way to competitive differentiation," says Boxer. She adds that "companies must realize that whether they ask for feedback or not, and whether that feedback is directed at the company or not, feedback is being given online all the time."