

What Do Customers Want?

By Rhonda Abrams

Many business owners feel perplexed by the question, "What do customers want?"

When you don't understand what customers want, it's tough to effectively sell your product or service. When you do, you can get straight to the heart of the matter, like the Vietnamese restaurant I used to live near in San Francisco. I never knew the real name, but always referred to it by the big sign they had out front: "Fresh, Cheap, Good."

Of course, one of the great frustrations is that customers don't understand they have to make trade-offs. I'm no exception. The other day I was soliciting bids on a big print job. Of course, I wanted a top-notch job, at a great price, done right away. One printer wisely told me, "Look, you can have two of the three: fast, cheap, or good, but you can't have them all."

"Why not?" I wanted to whine. While I certainly understand the realities of business when I'm selling, I'm less understanding when I'm buying.

The truth is you can't give customers everything - even when you'd like to. As a business owner, you've got real-life constraints. If you do high-quality work, you're going to pay your employees well and use expensive materials. So you'll be good but not cheap. If you manage to do outstanding work at low prices, you're going to have more work than you can handle, so you're not going to be able to turn around jobs very quickly. You'll be cheap but not fast.

Every successful business has its strengths - it's place in the market. So how do you get your message across?

You don't necessarily want to be as direct as the Vietnamese restaurant. After all "Fresh, cheap, good" sounds great. But remember, there are trade-offs, and "Fresh, good, expensive" doesn't sound nearly so appealing.

Most marketing strategists agree that people buy benefits, not features. In other words, customers are more concerned about how a purchase affects their lives than about how the company achieves those results. No matter how cool you think your new improved business process is, your marketing message should concentrate on the real benefits customers receive.

What messages do you give customers to motivate them to purchase?
Traditional marketing experts emphasize "the Four P's:"

1. Product. The tangible aspects of the product or service itself.
2. Price. The cost advantage.
3. Place. The location's convenience and decor.
4. Promotion. The amount and nature of the marketing activities.

These elements leave a lot out of the marketing picture. So, I've come up with a broader definition. When thinking about how to describe your product or service to a customer, keep in mind Rhonda's Five "F's" of Customer Motivation:

1. Functions. How does the product or service meet customers' concrete needs? Does it do the specific thing they need done right now?
2. Finances. How will the purchase affect their overall financial situation, not just the price of the product or service, but other savings and increased productivity?
3. Freedom. How convenient is it to purchase and use the product or service? How will they gain more time and less worry in other aspects of their lives?
4. Feelings. How does the product or service make customers feel about themselves, and how does it affect and relate to their self-image? Do they like and respect the salesperson and the company?

5. Future. How will they deal with the product or service and company over time? Will support and service be available? How will the product or service affect their lives in the coming years, and will they have an increased sense of security about the future?

Customers, of course, want benefits in all these areas, so be aware of how your product or service fulfills the entire range of their needs. But remember, business, like life, has trade-offs, and you're not going to be able to do everything. So figure out in which of these areas your product or service excels -- and which most motivates your customers -- and concentrate on those.