

Why Should Your Customers Believe You?

By Gerard Frey and Nora Laughton

When customers defect, do you know why? Do you offer the right services in your maintenance or warranty packages? How would you know if you did?

Many companies will spend much time and money researching the industry and doing comparative studies. What? You don't have the time or money to do the same thing? Or don't know where to start? Here's a better idea. The best way for your customers to believe what you tell them is to engage them in the process and use their input to build whatever service or functionality or story you need to sell them. Think about it—in the software industry, what is more powerful than being able to tell prospects and customers that the reason the system works this way is because “our customers told us to build it that way.”

The same logic applies to researching what maintenance services to offer and crafting your value for maintenance story. You may think you know what your customers want, but have you ever asked them? It's pretty easy to do and the results are powerful.

If you follow these five steps, your customers can become your best resource and they'll remember you asked them for their input the next time you call them:

- ***Segment your customer base.*** Large customers often have different needs than medium or small customers, and customers that are further along in their lifecycle with your products usually have different service and support needs.
- ***Create a simple survey.*** Ask your customers what you really want to know. “Would you like this feature added to our maintenance offerings? Would you be willing to pay for it?” or “What are your long term plans for remaining a customer of ours?” Perhaps questions about why they stopped paying maintenance if that is what you are trying to find out. Don't be afraid to ask customers outright. They'll appreciate your forthrightness. “We want you to be a reference for us—what will it take?”
- ***Deploy the survey.*** There are inexpensive online surveys that are quite good and easy to set up. You could use an expensive methodology which might require complex decision trees, but if you can get along without those complex decision trees, there is really no need.
- ***Analyze the results.*** Map the results back to the segmentation you did earlier so that you can group the responses according to type of customer. Look for patterns and trends. Use the results to either create appropriate marketing campaigns or build features and plans accordingly. For example, if your customers don't see value in and never use a particular feature of your services offering, you might consider dropping it from the menu.
- ***Validate your findings and plans with your customers before you implement particularly large-scale changes.*** Employ face-to-face visits as much as possible during this stage. It's another opportunity to get in front of your customers to talk to them about their needs. Make sure your customers know that you are re-tooling or re-building based on their input. And don't stop there. Continue to solicit customer input on a regular basis and refine your message(s) because it will change over time depending on what your customers tell you.

The next time your customer says, “Who told you to do it that way?” you can say with confidence “You did!”

