Making Loyalty Happen

By Chris Reimann (KS&R Principal)

More loyal and profitable B2B relationships begin with a systematic customer engagement program, not just satisfaction feedback.

The digital age has opened up new customer touchpoints and expectations. We are all consumers and bring those experiences to our business lives. Just as personalization has become a staple of online shopping, B2B buyers have also come to expect higher levels of service and personalization from their product and service providers.

This means that we're dealing with something bigger than just satisfying the B2B customer. Satisfaction is a moving measurement target, influenced by experiences *du jour*. Satisfied customers don't necessarily mean loyal ones. They can be satisfied, yet switch to a competitor who offers greater value. And, when looking at Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) results in the aggregate, it can be easy to miss the warning signs.

Customer Engagement

We're talking about **Customer Engagement (CE)**, which is an active relationship-building program designed to deepen the behavioral connection with customers by becoming a partner in their success.

Your first reaction might be to think that this is the job of your sales / account team. That's true – in part. But it's important to ask yourself some critical questions.

- Is it practical to rely on the sales team for all feedback, with hundreds or thousands of B2B customers and some that don't even have dedicated account reps?

- Would sales provide rapid enough feedback in this age of instant information?

- Would account teams be talking to the key stakeholders who actually drive strategic needs in their organizations?

Customer engagement should be more than just a sales effort. Imagine if you were able to obtain feedback directly from your customers' key stakeholders and executives. You could align your services to your customers' strategic goals. You could become an integral player in your customers' planning. You could leverage opportunities to outperform competitors because you would know your customers better. Once you could achieve that, then you would be in a position to create real customer impact – *helping the customer become more successful by doing business with your company than by doing business with one of your competitors*.

The Engagement Model

Developing a Customer Engagement program, complete with

operationalizing ways to connect and gather feedback, can feel daunting. It requires a change in mindset and internal accountability. And it also requires expertise. KS&R has successfully helped clients develop and operate such CE programs through a blend of market research and "listening posts" built into internal business processes. Below are best-practices from our solution, KS&R's enCOMPASS® Relationship Equity Builder.

- **More control by engaging a broader set of customers.** Unlike CSAT, CE provides a more compelling value proposition to encourage customers to participate. Typically, multiple stakeholders per customer organization become involved, allowing you to gather feedback that is uniquely actionable to that business account.

- **Integrate feedback into your internal business processes and continuous improvement efforts**. Instead of periodically exporting batches of data, KS&R has enhanced operational integration with

clients' Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems and business processes to receive direct, automated, weekly feeds. Functional decision makers use that direct connection to quickly respond – resulting in fewer headaches and surprises.

- **Make actionable feedback.** Ongoing customer feedback produces tangible, timely insights that are fed directly to the people responsible for different aspects of the customer relationship. KS&R's enCOMPASS® incorporates all principal measures of the relationship: product, services, sales, purchasing, operations, finance, etc. For example, a results dashboard can be developed for a specific customer, with indexed scores and verbatim feedback on needs and issues which can be acted upon by your various functional owners – *for that specific account!*

- **Target unique needs**. An effective CE model should be tailored to your customer – focused on the topics that are most important to them. This includes targeting questions / feedback for different customer stakeholder types.

- **Close the loop**. When your functional units discover issues about a specific customer and also understand the reasons behind the customer input, then you have the power to act in a swift, targeted fashion. You show the customer that you not only heard them, but that you are committed to strengthening the relationship – based on their input. These actions will have a major impact on loyalty!

- **Ongoing processing.** Keep the feedback loop open, with regular waves so issues and needs can be addressed quickly. It does no good to hear that a customer is unhappy 6 months after the fact. More frequent touchpoints and fast action loudly communicates "You are valued!"

The result from the best practices listed above is actionable, direct-to-the-customer insights and control over the health and profitability of B2B accounts. Customer issues don't remain open and unsolved; instead, the right corporate team takes rapid action to resolve customer problems.

If your company had better information, faster, how would it change the way you do business? Contact KS&R to find out more.

About the Author

As a member of KS&R's Board of Directors, Chris brings 20 years of B2B and B2C marketing experience in guiding clients on customer loyalty, new product development, product usability, and VOC needs assessment. Having a background in both qualitative and quantitative research methods, he is skilled in applying proven creative approaches designed to answer clients' key business imperatives. He holds a BA from St. Bonaventure University and an MBA from the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University.

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