



LISTEN TO YOUR CLIENTS! YOU OWE IT TO YOUR STRATEGY.

MARCH 2016

I had a wry smile when I read the recent article in **BL Magazine** "*Please, Please, Please give us feedback (Pretty please...)*", for which I was recently interviewed, regarding the thin line between getting useful quality feedback from clients and just plain annoying them with inane, misplaced pop-ups and the like. It's not that I think these mechanisms "don't work" (as the article suggested), as I believe they can be a useful part of any structured client feedback programme, but rather it is the unfocused, scattergun use of them that annoys me (and other clients and potential clients, I am sure). When a pop-up jumps out of the screen asking to "Tell us how were doing!" within 10 seconds of landing on a website (especially when it is my first visit!) ... well, let's just say it's not the best start to creating a good client experience.

Improper use of any client feedback mechanism can easily result in unnecessarily negative views purely as a result of a misapplication of the mechanism. Why would you want to fail at the first hurdle? Like any mechanism to garner feedback from clients, positive or negative, they need to be properly and, dare I say, respectfully applied in order to ensure the feedback is as 'clean', real and true as possible. Now, you'll never completely eliminate illogical, irrational or emotionally driven responses – that's the nature of client feedback – but by having an appropriately planned, focused and measurable client feedback programme or initiative you are much more likely to gather useful information which can be used to hone, shape and drive strategy. As an aside, if you have upset a client to the point where they do respond in such an irrational, illogical or emotional way, then it's certainly worth knowing what you actually did to encourage such a response from them. The chances are the client will not see themselves as being irrational, illogical or emotional either, so perhaps best to focus on the nature of the issue rather than the way it's delivered.... but I digress!

There's no brain surgery here. We all know, listening to our clients helps us to understand if we are meeting the promise that our brand is making. Listening to what our clients say is the most obvious way to identify inconsistencies or issues in your business. This includes complaints, which should be treated like gold! Now, every business has a documented complaints procedure, right? No? How much easier does it get to identify an issue or inconsistency in your business than by listening to what your clients are telling you?

But, listening is the easy part. Acting on matters raised is often a little more complex. Now, sure, some client feedback or complaints are easy to resolve. These type of issues

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" ...change management "

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are often far from complex, but time-and-time again we see businesses fail to act efficiently and effectively on seemingly simple matters, even when the impact on the client experience can be converted to an overwhelmingly positive one when doing so. The lack of response by an employee to a client's feedback or a complaint may due to a number of reasons. It could just be down to one lazy, apathetic employee. Or, perhaps this employee's behaviour is symptomatic of training or recruitment issues, or a staff engagement and buy-in problem, or a lack of appropriate processes for dealing with complaints (i.e. a complaints procedure!)... or all of the above and more? Whatever it may be, it could point to much wider cultural, operational and organisational issues which may be endemic in a business and which may require significant action to resolve. This is where the complexity lies. As we all know, change management within a business can be a huge challenge, especially when it involves driving culture change, so much so, they are often at the very heart of an organisation's strategic focus.

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This highlights the importance of having a programme to manage and deal with all forms of client feedback (and having decent quality data management and CRM to back it up, but that's another story - see [Data, decision & dinosaurs](#)). It should be considered a fundamental part of any focused strategy and used to align business operations, client experience and service delivery models throughout the whole organisation at all levels. That's why it is often as much a cultural change programme as an operational or organisational change programme.

Inevitably, any strategic improvements that may arise take time. Someone, preferably (no, definitely!) at the top of the organisation, needs to own the process and develop a clear strategy that applies to the whole business if these insights are going to be used to change the culture of the business. This can't be left to siloed departments or business units, as clients are unlikely to differentiate your business in this way. Clients take a holistic view of your operations and believe your brand promise applies to all of your business wherever they choose to purchase a product or service. They want a consistent client experience everywhere, every time – and that's what we should strive for. The internal processes, procedures and functions that support the client experience are not their problem, they're yours, but by listening to your clients you can gain incredible insight and information on how to improve and align them to ensure the client experience you do deliver is as impressive as possible. In this way client feedback has the power to change an organisation for the better by driving actions to realign a business to its brand promise. That'll have real and tangible bottom line benefits if you get it right. It'll help your brand and your promise to stay honest and real.

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A positive client service experience is essential to building loyalty, a long-term client base and driving financial health within any organisation. An effective programme to manage client feedback is vital if it is to convert to real and lasting cultural and strategic change. It should be treated like any other programme requiring investment, and should be shown to deliver a tangible return on the

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investment. To reiterate, it must be focused and measurable, as well as supported and driven from the very top. It seems crazy that any business would not want to listen to their clients and harness the insights of feedback, including complaints, to improve and optimise their business strategy. But... listening is only the first step. Responding and acting to create real change are the more challenging, but potentially hugely rewarding, next steps.

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