

Say "Hello" to Your Inner Customer (If No One Answers, You're in Deep Trouble)

By Dick Lee, High-Yield Methods

This is the fourth of several articles focusing on findings in [Customers Say What Companies Don't Want To Hear](#), a study by Dick Lee and David J. Mangen, Ph.D.

Imagine you're a female senior executive in a large corporation, working in a high-rise building. One day, you return to your office and find an unmarked coffee cup full of carefully arranged flowers on your desk—accompanied by an unsigned card with no sender identification, saying:

*[Your name],
It's been awhile.
Missing you. I've changed ...
for the better. Done
a lot of growing lately.
Hope to see you soon.*

How would you feel, standing in this woman's pumps? Well, the executive who shared her experience with me thought she was either being stalked or sexually harassed. Either thought was equally menacing.

So, after ascertaining that no one saw who sneaked into her office to leave this chilling message, she reported the incident, which triggered an internal investigation, the results of which helped her track down the sender.

Guess how she felt when she discovered it was not a deviant or dangerous person who sent her this message but her very own florist, Bachman's, an iconic floral retailer with positive karma and nearly universal brand awareness in the Twin Cities? Turns out, the Bachman's marketing team had assembled a list of potential women customers, affluent and influential ones, then unleashed this unidentified flying flowers (UFF) campaign.

This target of this campaign calls the whole incident "an unbelievable nightmare." She shared the offending communication with friends—women and men—to get a reality check. Responses ran the gamut from horrified to outraged. I repeated her sampling, with similar results. The reactions of those I told her story to ranged from a feeling that the florist was run by a group of "misogynists" to an emphatic "I'm never going there again." No, this wasn't about her. It's about them.

But wait, it gets worse. The target rose up and mailed a protest letter to the CEO of Bachman's. "Words can hardly express the distress and fear that a recent delivery of flowers with an unsigned card caused me," she wrote. She noted that "speculation about who could have sent them caused tremendous anxiety and fear. I had a heightened sense of attention to my surroundings at all times, started to carry mace and was looking into purchasing a new phone with caller ID."

Customer relations

If you were the CEO of Bachman's, how would you respond? Well, this bloke forwarded her letter to the offending advertising agency, Gabriel deGrood Bendt, and told the folks there to deal with it. Which a *female* GdB agency manager did—replying to this formerly loyal customer with a patronizing letter of apology defending the campaign. "It was deemed essential that we get the attention of hard-to-reach women like yourself," she wrote, saying, "It was never our intent to cause alarm or distress."

Yeah. Sure. Scare the crap out of women to get their attention, then say, "Oops, sorry." The customer also received a \$30 gift certificate as a Band-Aid for her emotional wounds.

Totally out of touch? You betcha. The company and agency both. Despite their empathic deficiencies, someone on the seller side should have shown sufficient respect for customers to run this by a test panel of "target women" before starting the bombing run.

But apparently customer respect was in short supply. I say "apparently," because my phone message to Bachman's president, left with his personal secretary, went unanswered; and because I never received the return call promised by the agency's letter writer after she tap-danced through our first conversation.

So what price will they pay for their transgressions? The price for Bachman's could be considerable. First, this flower-loving customer will never shop there again. Next, the offense taken by others at Bachman's ploy will almost certainly cost it more business. But most importantly, the viral "buzz factor" surrounding Bachman's attack will be poisonous. And if these yo-yos deliver a sufficient number of these UFF bundles, they'll rue the day they ever had this brain fart, because Bachman's could wind up shrinking rather than growing.

The significance

How rare are incidents like this? Unfortunately, they're common (although this one is notably egregious). But they are avoidable—if companies, marketers, advertisers and researchers—would only retrieve their long lost "inner customers" and listen to them. Just thinking for a fleeting moment about the many personal and often intimate occasions when women receive flowers—and the veiled threat represented by receiving them anonymously—would have prevented Bachman's from stabbing itself in the back (or letting the agency stab it). The "inner customer" inside most people would get this right away.

"Inner customer?" Wait a minute. Haven't we all been taught to do exactly the opposite, to get *outside* ourselves to understand people of all different shapes, sizes, ethnicity, demography and planet-of-origin? You betcha, we have. To the point of seeing everything (whoops, Freudian slip; I meant "everybody") in the abstract—as a bundle of descriptive labels and statistics.

When customers are abstractions, we can rationalize doing anything. There are no immutable rules of human behavior to break. Only abstract objects without human emotions and sensitivities. So we can treat 'em any old way we like. A perfect scenario for strategic and creative license—except for one problem. As corroborated by my and David J. Mangan's study, [Customers Say What Companies Don't Want To Hear](#), (May 2006), customers are rising up and demanding that sellers treat them as human beings, not "marketing targets."

In fact, our study findings are very clear in defining customer-focused behaviors as the leading driver of purchase decisions—over price, over customer information sharing, way over brand, even further over offering online customer service and cross-selling.

So why don't we just market, advertise, sell and service the way *customers* want? Because customers don't know squat about marketing and advertising?

Au contraire. Customers have more "feet on the street" sense about marketing and advertising than most marketers and advertisers have about customers. Which is too bad, because marketing and advertising should be facilitators of communication between companies and customers.

Company-customer communication typically has a one-way flow—from company to customers. And when companies do want to know more about customers, they focus on statistics and labels—rather than on the human dimension that identifies what buyers are feeling and thinking as they make purchase decisions. Among the many negative consequences are self-inflicted injuries like the anonymous flowers campaign.

Time for sellers to get in touch with their inner customers? You betcha. Flowers, anyone?



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