

The Customer-Centric Nonprofit Brand

BY ELAINE FOGEL

Without stakeholders, your nonprofit would not exist. It's that simple. Your organization's success and longevity depend on acquiring and retaining "customers"—donors, volunteers, funders, partners, employees, etc. Before making business decisions or taking important actions, it is important for the board and management to always ask, "How will this affect our customers?" Then they can make the best decisions, given the organization's financial and human resources.

However, you cannot do so without developing and maintaining a customer-centric mindset. In the nonprofit world, this means serving customers' needs and engaging them as people individually, not as a collective. It is a mindset that puts customers at the center of every action.

Where to Start

Establishing a customer-centric mindset does not happen in a vacuum. No matter how many employees your nonprofit may have, it is critical to foster a culture of cohesion, collaboration, internal communication and teamwork. On the other hand, maintaining silos of competing departments and egos can be extremely detrimental. Remember, customers do not care about your internal structure. The last thing they want to hear is "That's not my job" or "That's not my department" or "Sorry, I can't help you."

To foster cohesion and collaboration, take a proactive approach to get everyone involved. "We provide training on the culture of philanthropy to both board members and staff every year," says Mandy Fischer, development director for the Intervale Center (www.intervale.org) in Burlington, Vt., which strengthens community food systems by improving farm viability, promoting sustainable land use and engaging its community in the food system. "Basically, what a culture of philanthropy means to us is that everybody in our organization is

an ambassador and engaged in relationship building. Everyone can make a case for giving."

Nevertheless, it is essential to keep in mind that this is not a one-size-fits-all effort. "We are realistic," Fischer says. "We want our board and staff members to find where they are comfortable. Some people like writing notes, some like organizing behind the scenes and some like connecting one-on-one with donors. We treat them as individuals, too, and do not expect that they will all contribute in the same way, and we are grateful for everybody's hard work."

And fundraising? "Our executive director is personally involved in fundraising, our systems support donors and development is viewed and valued as a mission-aligned program of our organization,"

Fischer says. "This last one is critically important. Development is a program, and we carry out the mission of our organization through our work of fundraising.

"We embody the culture of our organization, and a big part of our work is connecting with people who share our vision for a healthier food system and planet," she adds. "In this way, there is no disconnect between the fundraising arm of our organization and the program and social enterprise arms. We are one organization carrying forward one mission."

This extends to volunteering. "Our corporate volunteer program is also robust, with development and program staff collaborating and introducing the organization to participants quite successfully," Fischer says. "This program is a great way to connect with business donors and build awareness and support within local businesses for our cause.

"When we have people out to volunteer, we can educate them about our mission and help them develop relationships that deepen the connections their workplace has with us," she explains. "This work is quintessential donor stewardship, and it is carried out by both development and program staff."



A Customer-Centric Brand at Work

At the heart of a customer-centric nonprofit brand is customer service—how your organization manages its customer relationships, both internally and externally.

What will success look like when you do this well?

The superlative outcome in external customer service is when customers have memorable brand experiences, continue to give to and/or interact with your organization and then enthuse about it to others. Quite simply, the more that customers trust your nonprofit, the more they will refer it to friends, family, colleagues and their online networks. And when customers talk about your organization positively, its brand can rise to a top-of-mind position, giving it a distinct edge over other similar organizations.

Of course, many factors are at play in determining your customers' retention and loyalty. However, when your nonprofit puts customers first, consistently wowing and engaging them, they can continue to see the value of interacting with or working for your organization. When you advise your customers rather than “sell” to them, you can gain their trust and retain them longer. For example, when dealing with donors, share stories in your newsletters and other content, as well as in one-to-one conversations. Ask them questions to help them better determine where and how they want to support the organization.

Customer-centric nonprofits recognize the importance of customer engagement. The more yours communicates and engages with customers in their preferred channels, the more it can inform, inspire, motivate and entice them to your calls of action.

Learn more about your customers, not by being snoopy but by being friendly. Listen to them, their personal stories, desires, preferences and complaints. Customers are the best information source on your nonprofit's brand. Knowing what they like and dislike about the organization will help you identify its strengths and weaknesses. Customer input also can help ascertain any new opportunities you may not have previously recognized and can guide any changes for improvement. Collect and record important information in your fundraising or customer relationship management software. This allows you to anticipate their needs and surprise them.

Another important point is keeping promises. Just as keeping promises in life is important to your credibility, the same is true for nonprofits. Your organization's promises represent its word and brand reputation. When it cannot keep its promises, this can have a detrimental effect on its sustainability. Yet, when you serve and engage customers with excellence, delivering

on the organization's promises consistently, they will gradually develop a reason to believe in your brand. “At the Intervale Center, we spend a lot of time talking to donors, writing personalized notes and connecting with them individually, because we know that when we build authentic relationships with people, they will respond in kind,” Fischer says. “We work really hard to connect with people because emotional connection is what inspires giving. And it's also what makes our jobs fulfilling.”

Indeed, the outstanding result in internal customer service is when employees enjoy their jobs, take pride in their work, achieve their potential, feel valued and appreciated, stay longer and praise your organization to others.

“We definitely strive to hire staff, especially within development, who love people and whom people love,” Fischer says. “For example, we just hired a community relations coordinator, and though we needed someone with events logistics experience and an eye for design, we also wanted to hire someone who was outgoing, trustworthy, able to establish trust with people quickly and able to ask people what they need. We were lucky to find a candidate with a lot of those skills.”

Customer experience standards can help develop and maintain a customer-centric nonprofit. You can write a standards handbook yourself, hire a consultant to create one or ask an employee committee to develop one collaboratively. When there are clear-cut, customer-centric standards that all employees believe in and follow consistently, they will know what to do and when. These guidelines can lessen confusion and customer missteps and, in turn, greatly reduce employee friction and stress.

To ensure that you have everyone's buy-in, you may want to add measurable customer orientation expectations to employee job descriptions and performance reviews. Tie these in with a recognition program, and you have closed the loop to ensure customer and brand experience consistency.

Positive Results

When your nonprofit develops a solid brand reputation for being customer-centric and other operational factors are relatively stable, it can entice more inbound leads, referrals and buzz. This can improve success, generating more money to fulfill the mission and increasing growth potential to meet demand. “Since we have become donor-centric, we have exceeded our fundraising goals every year,” Fischer says. “Our annual fundraiser has a very high retention rate, and attendees rave about how fun our event is. We want everyone with whom we

interact to go away feeling appreciated and like they had a good time.

“We don’t want donating to feel like a transaction,” she emphasizes. “Making a donation should be a natural expression of one’s generosity and leave people feeling warm, appreciated and powerful.”

Of course, there are challenges when developing and implementing a customer-centric mindset. “This work takes a serious commitment of time and energy that comes naturally to some people and less naturally to others,” Fischer admits. “We have tried to tackle this problem by creating a lot of opportunities for both board and staff members to engage along a continuum, starting with simply making a donation in support of the organization and extending all the way to asking for and securing major gifts.”

While no one likes to hear complaints from customers, you should think of them as gifts to your organization. (Yes, you read that correctly.) Although most customers will not take the time to voice their discontent, the ones

who do can give you opportunities to investigate and identify where internal problems lie. The other unhappy customers simply will not come back, and you will not know why.

In the end, Fischer points out, the most important part of this work is not taking anything too personally. “People are crazy, and relationships are hard. We all make mistakes, do or say something embarrassing and feel totally awkward almost every day,” she says. “Having a team around you that supports you in your mistakes, can joke and make you feel better and can help you figure out your next move is really critical to building and maintaining a donor-centric mindset.”

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