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How to integrate the customer relationship to take ethical businesses to the next level

Confidence and trust in corporate America have been eroded to an all-time low by the succession of corporate scandals and executive malfeasance that continues to unfold. This era of social irresponsibility presents an unprecedented window of opportunity for socially and environmentally responsible businesses to segue into the mainstream. As Americans recoil and search for signs of corporate responsibility and accountability, they are more receptive than ever to green businesses' hallmark messages of ethics, integrity and social responsibility. Now is the time for ethical businesses to rise to the forefront as never before. How can these companies maximize this chance to reach the next level and have even greater impact in the marketplace?

The solution is to leverage and be defined by the customer relationship. If a company can visualize customer relationships as organic, living entities and focus their marketing efforts on growing these relationships to their fullest, healthiest capacities, the result will be that the business will achieve its mainstream potential. With the customer relationship as the cornerstone, the company can reach "critical mass," a domino effect set in motion by the culmination of an increasing multitude of customer relationships that not only sustain but continue to build the business.

One way to do this is for management to consider the servant-leader approach. The greatest leaders are not only servants to their communities but also to their customers, and this is the very essence of the socially responsible movement. The most successful businesses will be the ones that adapt to changing times and societal trends by using different tools to manage the customer relationships.

In an effort to help businesses expand and capitalize on these critical connections, my firm, Picard & Company, has devised the "Relationship Velocity Index," a proprietary, analytical process that gauges how to maximize the customer relationship and utilize the optimal mix of marketing and communication tools for greatest impact in changing times.

In discovering the best way to connect to customers, your business will have a competitive advantage over others. To help you optimize your customer relationships to take advantage of the current business climate, here are seven Relationship Velocity Index components that we regard as crucial to gauge, deepen and accelerate the relationship.

- ◆ **Listen.** Listening closely to the customer's needs, gaining insight into their problems and asking questions about how they are responding to change is the first step of the fact-finding mission that will enable you to gather the necessary information to formulate a solution for the customer.
- ◆ **Make it personal.** How is your business using knowledge to build dialogue? Developing deeper customer rapport means learning about what drives them, what is important to them, and connecting these insights to your message.
- ◆ **Leverage new technologies.** Does your company use the latest technologies? Assess all the physical touch points that connect to the customer and then utilize the best possible mix of tools, such as phone, direct mail, DVDs, CDs, Internet, point-of-sale, e-mail and digital communications.

- ◆ **Educate.** Are your business product and message understood by current and prospective customers? Make them aware of the value and the benefits, and use the latest technologies along every stage of your relationship.
- ◆ **Sell.** Always keep in mind that business is not about selling people what they don't need, but trying to solve a problem. The emphasis goes beyond the product or service, and shifts to offering effective solutions that help customers realize their goals.
- ◆ **Price and product.** Can you redefine your product or service around a customer's need? How are you pricing and structuring the product or service? Is the pricing consistent with the quality? If not, pricing, packaging and servicing may need to be adjusted and managed.
- ◆ **Deliver service.** How are you managing the tools of service such as resolving disputes, answering questions, handling billing and delivery, and developing value-added offerings? Think of service as your most important product feature.

The Relationship Velocity Index mix is unique to each individual enterprise, and your business planning must remain strategic because these components are always changing and will be different from one day to the next. Nevertheless, these are the building blocks to grow the business and the mechanisms to manage customer relationships in order for business to flourish.

One way to envision how the Index works is to imagine that you are driving a car along the cobblestone path of the marketplace. It's a bumpy, difficult ride as the car bounces along in various directions as it hits many stones. You will eventually get where you are headed with your product or service, but it takes a while because the trip is neither time nor fuel-efficient. Then imagine that you have been able to align your business with your customers with insight gleaned from the Index. Now the difference is like driving a turbocharged car along the Autobahn. Because the highway is smoothly paved, the ability to accelerate is greatly increased, the speed limit is raised tremendously, and the ride is steady because the resistance of the cobblestones has been eliminated. Ultimately, you get where you are headed much faster. The same analogy applies to your business. When all of the components surrounding the customer relationship are integrated and maximized, it's as if more entrances and exit ramps have been added to the superhighway and your ability to do business is accelerated to accommodate the increasing number of transactions and to reach broader audiences.

We stand at the cusp of great challenge and even greater opportunity as we shift into the era of corporate responsibility. Not since the 1960s and early 1970s has there been such a longing for ethics and integrity in this country. Socially and environmentally responsible businesses have been setting the pace and waiting for the evolution of our marketplace culture. In this new age of enlightenment, the businesses that will be most successful will be the ones that illumine the way with ethics, integrity and social awareness and responsibility. Not only will customers feel better about themselves by supporting socially responsible companies, but the companies will realize that their missions of making a positive impact on the environment and in the world will result in increased returns on investment and profitability.

I believe that socially responsible and green businesses have always been on a journey headed to the mainstream. Now is the time to fully integrate and manage your customer relationships — when all of the components surrounding the relationship coalesce, the original dream and mission of your business will come to fruition.



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