

F.I.R.E.F.L.Y.

Creating your competitive edge with the customer in front of you

Picture this in your shop front: a customer service staff easily makes small talk with a prospective buyer, keen to uncover the needs. With empathy, your staff also patiently listens to the customer's objections and concerns while nodding to show her understanding. The customer looked far from convinced then.

Fifteen minutes later, that same customer checks out at the cashier with a large purchase of merchandise smiling gleefully. She also cheerfully requests to be placed on the mailing list for future promotions.

The moment of experience for a customer is crucial for consumer brands today. How are you claiming your share of pocket with the customer? What else can you do to create defensive differences from the competition? What is the opportunity that lies in the retail or consumer sector today?

So today's landscape echoes a saturated arena of long time players challenged by daring young upstarts,

some brick-and-mortar but others that operate on a lean baseline cost to fight for the customer's share of the wallet.

Yes, the customer is spoilt for choice.

So how can your business thrive amidst the mighty torrent of intense competition in the retail and consumer industry? How do you maintain your competitive edge amidst the avalanche of new players in the marketplace? Where is the value proposition where customers are amassed with a plethora of similar brand and offerings?

Some would say to look inwardly for reinforce your strengths while others would opt to do a brand revitalisation initiative. Or perhaps, more staff training so that they will master their product's features and benefits effortlessly?

But if you are already doing all of the above, what can we do to move from good to great?

What we know is that Gallup reveals that "...customers who are fully engaged represent an average 23 per cent premium in terms of share of wallet, profitability, revenue, and relationship growth over the average customer."

In the recent Budget 2014 debates, Singapore's ministers advocate the push for higher productivity through job mastery, especially in sectors such as the retail sector, one of the sectors that is pulling down Singapore's average productivity level.

Since 2003, we have helped companies increase productivity, gain sustainable competitive advantage and build a mind-set of job mastery through service excellence and customer engagement.

Customer engagement is a vital business strategy that the entire organisation must own today because this is a compelling and defensive key to sustainable competitive advantage.

Why focus on engagement? We have observed that companies stand to gain sustainable competitive advantage through premium pricing, continued sales, customers' brand loyalty, customer insights and feedback on products and services. Engagement allows organisations to unearth customers' needs and leverage insights to propel ideas for improvement. How is this so?

Firstly, it was researched in 1995 in a classic management bestseller entitled "The Discipline of Market Leaders" by Tracey and Wiersema that one of the keys to sustainable

differentiation that creates enduring competitive stamina was what they termed "Customer Intimacy". This is the degree to which the customer is emotionally connected to your organisation, your brand and your products.

So how can you tap on this concept? Engagement can be a strategic instead of a tactical opportunity. The irony is that we invest in robust research to analyse and predict the customers' past behaviour we forget about the customer when he is before us. We assume that the standard service lines of product benefits will satisfy his needs. But how do we engage and win him or her over wholeheartedly?

Secondly, customers are influenced by a vast variety of media, not forgetting the nimble yet fast spreading community voices of social media and online portals. With this proliferation, why then do we leave the engagement to chance? We need to engage and show customers why we matter in their lives and how we make that difference.

Launching a new branding campaign or a novel product is a good start but the differentiation is not sustainable. We need to use the customer engagement runway to intentionally build trust and credibility with the customer.

'F.I.R.E.F.L.Y.' is the framework that has helped organisations leverage and connect to that customer in a consistent and reliable manner, be it face to face or on the phone. With this framework, organisations can translate their brand assets into a strategic customer engagement process.

From strategy and systems to staffing and shared vision, a deliberate process must be embedded to establish trust with customers, one conversation at a time. Engagement that is scalable and replicable.

This framework shares the seven elements in any customer encounter, applicable to both consumer and commercial markets. "F.I.R.E." seeks to understand the customer first then "F.L.Y." focuses on helping us to be understood by the customer.

Simple but not simplistic, we have seen organisations refine their value proposition by helping staff to restate the value from the customer's point of view.

"F" which stands for "Flex" emphasises the need to reframe your value based on the different customer profiles, even for the tiniest difference. "I" stands for "Impress" which focuses on how you build first good impressions because there is no second chance. "R" and "E" stand for "Rapport" and "Engage" and this completes the acronym "F.I.R.E.". Many organisations stop short at value justification or brand building but fail to create a genuine personal connection with the customer, hence validating why customers prefer to shop online instead.

Rapport building enables you to connect and break the ice with customers whilst uncovering his needs during the engagement dialogue. We have observed how staff, with proper guidance, build rapport to smoothen

the conversation with even difficult customers.


"F.I.R.E." softens the ground to connect with your customer's world because you understand the customer, as a person and not a transaction.

"F.L.Y." provides the approach to uncover and meet the need. "F" means "Flow" which helps you to focus on the customer's outcomes, not yours. This will help you pitch persuasively without using hard selling, over-the-top methods.

The final two alphabets in "F.L.Y." is "L" and "Y". They are the tipping point that determines the success of the dialogue. "L" stands for leverage differences – overturning objections into opportunities for clarification. Your organisation's ability to handle differences will determine if the customer stays or goes away.

Finally, "Y" means "yield" which means to harvest or to submit to. Here we highlight the need to create a win-win mindset and find common ground with the customer. How do you create a mutually beneficial solution and address his concerns? This is how you become a trusted brand that customers will never forget.

Uncover this latent competitive edge and design your unique engagement framework. When your organization is wired to establish a meaningful engagement at all touch points, you have created a sustainable yet replicable competitive edge that others will find difficult to replicate.

That is the strategic advantage we are talking about. There is light in any situation with F.I.R.E.F.L.Y. 

Regina Chua
Customer Engagement Expert
DD Consulting