

Is Customer Intimacy Still Important?

By: Kathy Fredrickson, owner, imark Consulting

Nine years ago I wrote my first marketing column for the *Appleton Post Crescent*. The subject was customer intimacy and I cited companies who have achieved a notable level of intimacy by having an instinctive understanding of its customers.

The companies I profiled back in 1999 were Harley Davidson and Unisys. Harley is still cranking out their HOGS and remains in sync with its messaging and its customers (they still maintain a robust “experience” section of their website). Unisys, the global information technology (IT) firm, has not fared as well. Four years ago, Unisys began cutting what would become a total of 5,500 jobs. Cutting positions has also manifested in to a less edgy, less confident messaging. Their mantra of 1999, “We eat, sleep and drink this stuff”, has been replaced by a more subdued “Imagine it. Done.” with the obvious play on words for the product, IT, and less focus on their people.

A defining difference between Harley and Unisys today is the level of customer intimacy. Harley knows their segments, the hard-core HOG owner and the executive-turned Harley rider, and serves them well. Unisys describes their organization as a worldwide information technology services and solutions company providing consulting, systems integration, outsourcing and infrastructure services. Their notable successes in 2007 were securing contracts with Ciba Specialty Chemicals, Sprint Communications and Malayan Bank Behard, all very diverse industries. Clearly they are in the business of trying to serve anyone and people are taking notice of their lack of focus. “I just can't see what Unisys is good at right now. The company continues to try and restructure and cut costs in a business that's deteriorating on them,” said Joseph Vafi, an analyst at Jefferies & Co. in San Francisco.

Customer intimacy requires focused business practice, from operations to customer service and marketing. The banking industry is in a competitive climate. Nine years from now, do you want to be a winner like Harley or an organization struggling to thrive, like Unisys?

With that said, here are some tips to get more intimate with your customers.

1. **Strive for authentic experiences.** Do your associates look like the people in your marketing brochures and on your website? Are they approachable, relaxed, and friendly? Is there any emotive quality and sincerity in their facial expressions?
2. **Commit to caring.** Intimacy can even start with your company's mission statement. If your message puts your organization on a pedestal, then throw it out. Your mission should reflect your associate's desires to “wow” their customers.
3. **Use high-touch words.** Take out the business jargon in your testimonials. Commitment to excellence, valued customers, great customer service and all those other overused terms sound canned. Don't talk about how great your products are- it's a perishable advantage. Talk about how your service makes customers feel. Use words that touch the senses.

As a banker, remember that it isn't enough to employ the best people and have the best infrastructure and security features. Compassionate and intuitive understanding for your customers' needs will keep them with you well into the future. In the words of Gian Luigi Longinotti-Buitoni, president of Ferrari-North

America, "You must seize any possible chance to modify the customer's perceived added value and swathe them in imagery that sustains and magnifies their dream's impact."