

Don't forget your "place" when creating a customer satisfaction strategy

Customer satisfaction is top-of-mind when assessing the market research needs of an organization, and is frequently a large portion of any company's research budget. It requires companies to measure customer feedback regarding their interaction with employees, products and even processes in an effort to identify areas for improvement.

Ultimately, the objective of these extensive efforts is to understand and repair shortcomings that can negatively impact the company, such as lost business.

But there is one element of the experience that may be overlooked, and that is the 'place' where the customer has the experience. The facility – be it a retail store, dealership, restaurant, branch, or service location – can have a major impact on satisfaction. Considering the expectations of your customers, the first and perhaps lasting impression of your facility may supersede that of your people, products or processes.

For example, if you have a lousy "street presence," will a potential customer even get close to your door? And once inside, is the environment consistent with the customer's expectations, or does it take away from their satisfaction?

In an ever-increasing homogenous retail environment, where consumers are more distracted than ever, they react quickly and make fast decisions in their purchase process. Often, they react based on familiarity, and have an expectation of your facility before they even experience it.

This makes it critically important for businesses to understand the impact that "place" has on consumers' purchase decisions. If businesses don't know the impact of their facilities, they may be losing revenue and customer opportunities.

Facility Assessment Research isn't a new concept, but this type of research has evolved from simple audits, where a minimum threshold is defined and achieved, to more comprehensive assessments of processes and presentation, applying scientific method research principles that outline clear actionable results. But evaluation against a set of criteria is only a part of the effort.

Investigating what customers want, what they notice, and at a minimum what they expect, leads to successful facility research. Laying the foundation with properly identified evaluation areas, thresholds defining success, and priorities aligned with overall objectives are necessary in planning, and where market research aids the process.

Like with any research, the core values of consistency and objectivity are critical: an independent third-party performs the evaluation, rigorously trained professionals are dedicated to the process, and an objective rating scale anchors the findings so that the conclusions in each area evaluated are based on the application of a scale, not its interpretation.

Beyond a typical audit or mystery shop, assessors are trained to have a heightened level of awareness about what makes a facility different. They are seasoned to “see” and evaluate, and not just “look” at a facility’s attributes, noticing the smallest details that can have a significant subconscious impact on consumers, from consumer sightlines to retail presence to cleanliness, and everything in between.

Your facility or “place” is a reflection of the executives or owners running the business, the company as a whole, and the brand. And first impressions mean everything. Customers increasingly expect personalized attention and close relationships whether they are buying a car, ordering a sandwich, or applying for a loan. Every customer notices something different about their surroundings, making every detail worthy of attention.

In short, an optimal customer experience includes a positive opinion of a physical store, space or location.

For Facility Assessment Research to be effective, it requires a thorough understanding of location standards and consumer expectations before an evaluation instrument is designed or assessors are sent into the field. That often means holding various focus group sessions with customers, and an investment in a scientifically proven research strategy by the governing body.

Once the baseline is established and a methodological process has been created, consistency of assessments can be achieved delivering quality, defensible results. The most effective Facility Assessment Research campaigns include not just a defined rating system but detailed assessor commentary and photographic evidence where images are captured from all the facility locations, in a similar fashion, for a variety of applications.

And the benefits of this approach are not just for corporate clients but for franchises as well. By generating more accurate results, company management will have a better idea of which locations are adhering to corporate guidelines, and applicable examples of optimal facility presentations. Franchises can be rewarded for superior results and they can even track their progress using online tools.

How much attention you are paying to your “place,” and making changes to address facility issues, could have a significant impact on your bottom-line results. And better data leads to actionable steps that will improve your customer satisfaction profile.

Pay Close Attention to Your Place – Your Customers Are Doing Just That

Your facility, environment or “place” directly impacts a customer’s experience, however, it is the component of customer satisfaction that often gets overlooked. Your “place” should receive the same critical reflection as your people, products and processes.

Having an effective strategy to improve your brand’s physical locations can improve customer satisfaction and increase revenue. Without such a plan, you are likely to fall behind your competition.

Jason Mantel
Morpace Vice President

