



# What Your Customers really want

**Emphasize the benefits they seek and you will compete on capabilities, not price.**

By David Visaggi, Inside Oil Consulting, Inc.

**Y**ears ago, when I was a manager at a fuel retailer, I worked with 3B's Car Repair (not the real name) to maintain our service vans. The company's owners were nice guys who would accommodate our repairs on short notice and were inexpensive—two important criteria to any business with fleet operations.

If you have ever managed a service department, you know what a hassle it is to send a technician's van in for repair. It costs time to transfer a technician to a spare van. Inevitably, the spare van is short on parts or tools, so jobs take longer than they should. Once the van is repaired, more time is spent switching the technician back into his regular van, further reducing productivity. For this reason, we would delay non-critical repairs until the vans went in for regular maintenance.

I began to notice that frequently, 3B's Car Repair would return our vans without completing the repair list. They were always in a hurry to move on to the next customer and would say something like, "Your brakes are done but we did not have time to fix the interior lights, so bring it back again next week."

This went on for a while and we continued to lose productivity as we switched the technicians in and out of spare vans. In the end, the repairs were always completed with competence, but I remained dissatisfied because my team's work output was hampered, as was my ability to meet the needs of my own customers in a timely manner.

One day, someone told me about another repair shop. So I met with John, the owner of J.C. Auto Repair. John's shop is impressive. He runs the largest non-dealer repair shop I have ever seen. We began bringing our vans there and they were repaired quickly and completely. Even though John gave us a fleet discount, he was more costly than 3B's car repair. In the end, it was worth it. My technicians were in the spare vans less frequently. As a result, their productivity was higher and we were taking better care of our customers.

The moral of the story is that John understood what I was really seeking from him. I was not simply looking for his service-vehicle repairs. I wanted the benefits of his service, which was to minimize our technician down time by getting our van repairs completed quickly and in one visit. This was why J.C. Auto Repair offered more benefits

than 3B's Car Repair.

Customers are interested in the benefits of working with your business, not necessarily your explicit product or service. Your particular product or service is merely the vehicle for providing the benefit customers seek. Both J.C. Auto and 3B's provided the same clear benefit: they both were able to properly repair our vans. However, I was never interested in better van repairs; 3B's mechanics were sufficiently capable. However, I was very interested when I found J.C. Auto minimized our vehicle down time (the benefit) by repairing our vehicles (the explicit service) quickly and in one shot.

Which one would be worth more to you?

So the million dollar question is: Do you know what benefits your customers are seeking?

I recently heard a radio ad for a dentist who promised "painless dentistry." Now that's a benefit people are interested in. Most dental patients are not having root canals by choice. They are afraid of the pain involved in getting a root canal. The pain-free dentist recognized a benefit consumers were seeking.

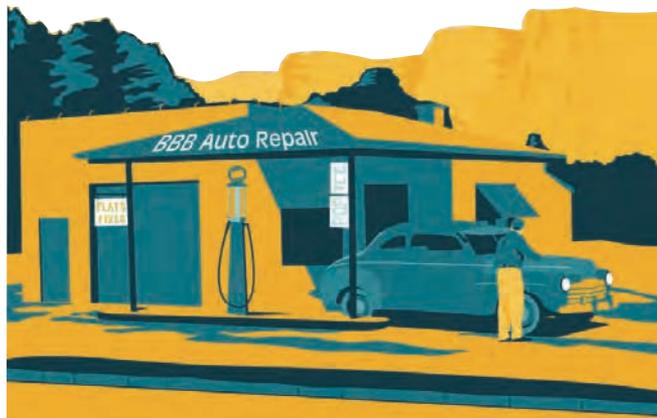
If you are a full service fuel retailer, your customers are not interested in just your fuel or your ability to repair heating equipment. Fuel does not interest most consumers. Repairs do not interest them either. Of course, they want to know you are competent, but that's the minimum standard; your competition is competent, too. Why should they buy from you?

More likely, your customers are interested in your ability to keep the heat on (or to fix it quickly) so their homes and businesses are comfortable and productive. They want to devote their attention to what truly interests them. Your residential customers want to focus on going to work, taking the kids to soccer practice, and running their households. Your commercial customers want to focus on their business, attend to their customers, and get things

done. Customers don't want to be distracted by heating repairs. In both cases, the benefit they seek is convenience. To quote Staples, they want the "easy button."

So how does understanding the benefits customers seek impact the way you market and operate your business?

Don't sell only your products and services. Sell the benefits, too. Unless you are selling Ferraris, your customers are not very in-



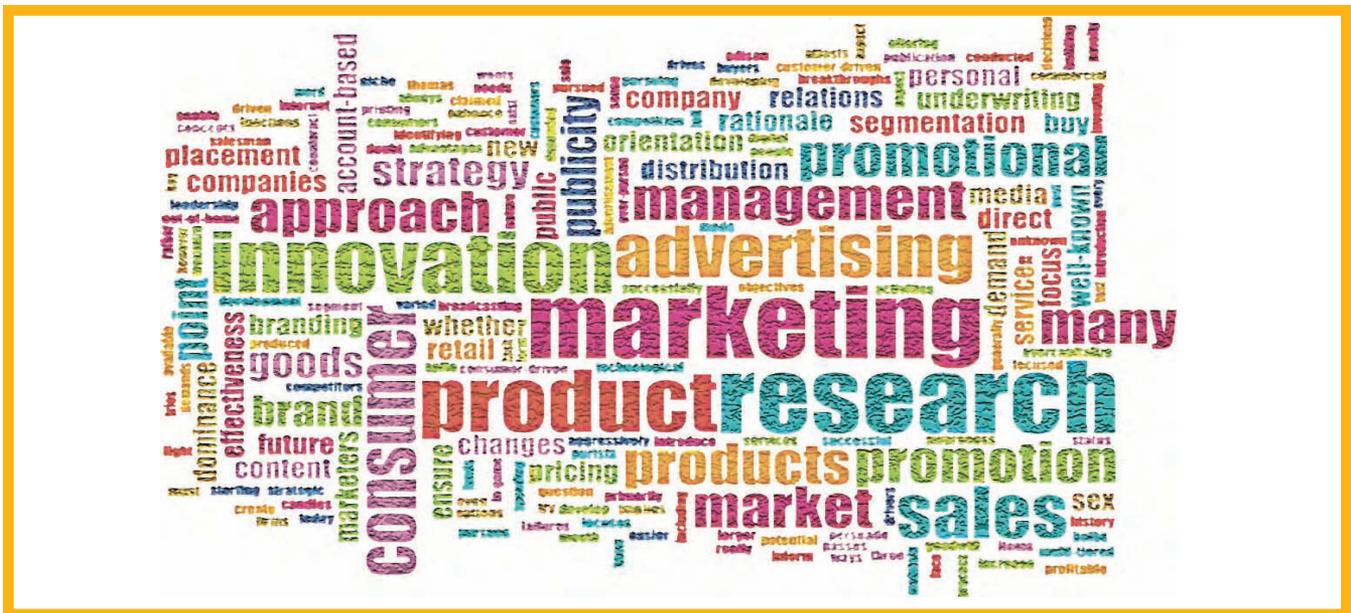
terested in your products or services. Your customers are interested in the benefits of doing business with you over your competition.

Consider this—many contractor websites have photos of their installations. I understand why they do this. They're proud of their work- not everyone can pipe a boiler like that! Just show the photos to any good contractor and he'll say, "Wowwww! That's a nice header!" Unfortunately, boiler photos don't impress consumers. Lay people don't know what a good installation looks like and you are not marketing to contractors. Those who know how a steam header should be piped probably don't need your service. However, lay people will respond to a promise of timeliness and convenience. That is a message they can understand and one that suits their needs.

One time, my team installed a steam boiler at a customer's house. The guys did a beautiful job. The piping

vice managers that solving the problem on the second or third visit is not just delaying success; it's actually failing to provide the benefit the customer is seeking. Remind your schedulers that same-day cancellations are failures to provide convenience to the customer. Remind your employees that *eventual* success is not success at all in the eyes of the customer.

A company wide commitment to providing benefits will change the way your business operates. Your technicians will be more thorough before racing off to the next call. Your schedulers will be careful not to over-schedule in order to avoid same day cancellations. Your customer service people will make an extra effort to get issues resolved the same day. Your managers will not only be looking at metrics of efficiency, they will also be looking at metrics of effectiveness to ensure the business is delivering on the benefits it promises.



was text book and the guys were rightfully proud of their work. Unfortunately, we ran into an intermittent electrical problem that took a few visits to sort out. At one point, the irate customer told me, "Just fix the damn problem and if your mechanic tells me one more time how good the header looks, I'm gonna slug him!" She was paying us for heat and convenience, not for a proper header.

Promoting your benefits will not only attract more customers, but also it will support higher margins. I recently read that surveys show consumers will pay 30% more for the same product if it is accompanied by better service. So market the underlying benefits of your offerings. Promote the convenience and reliability associated with your products and services. Tell your customers you will show up when promised. Tell them you will complete your work on time. Tell them how you ensure you will get it right the first time. Promote yourself in a way that meets the needs of customers... and they will be interested.

Your customers are not the only ones who need to hear this message.

Promote your benefits to your staff as well. If you are a fuel retailer or mechanical contractor, remind your ser-

Suddenly, the priorities change when selecting among technology vendors. For example, you may seek software that offers an easy to read service schedule screen so your schedulers can make informed decisions quickly without needing to change screens, thus minimizing the customer's time on the phone.

Customers pay more to those who deliver benefits. Not only will they pay more, but they will want to buy other things from you. Then they will tell their friends about your company because it is hard to find fuel companies and contractors who get it right the first time.

Of course, not all customers and fuel markets are interested in the same benefits. The benefits I described above may not apply to your customer base. But the point remains, if you can identify the benefits your market is seeking from your products and services, then you have a real opportunity to serve the market better than your competition. So make sure your staff understands those benefits. If you can deliver on them, your business will grow not only in volume, but also in margin.

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