



What Your Customers really want

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

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Years 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-



