

7 Ways to Build Customer-Focused Companies

by Robbie Kellman Baxter



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We all want our customers to love us. Customer loyalty continues to be the Holy Grail for many companies. A simple way to drastically improve loyalty of customers is to center your business around your customers. Treating customers well, listening to their feedback and soliciting their opinions simultaneously create better products and build community. Doing this doesn't cost a lot, but it does require a mind shift.

Here are 7 techniques used by successful companies—from Intuit to Coca-Cola, to Microsoft. How many have you implemented already?

1. **Eat your own dog food (if possible).** If you sell clothes, encourage your employees to wear them. If you sell call-center software, use it in your call center. Even if the product isn't exactly targeted toward your average employee, try to find ways to use it.
2. **Have everyone sell the product.** Employees, from the bottom to the top, need to have some first-hand understanding of how a customer interacts with your brand and products. One of my clients, an ASP serving small business owners, requires everyone in marketing to "work the phones" on a regular basis.
3. **Include the customer throughout the market validation process.** Whenever I am brought in for a market validation process, I like to include customers in each phase of product development. Early on, we ask existing or prospective customers if they've ever had XYZ problem to identify the "pain point." Later in the process, we show customers the value proposition or the product

prototype and get their feedback on when, how, why and whether they would use such a product. We recognize that we need to be open to negative feedback if this process is to work.

4. **Create a corporate culture that doesn't require mind-reading.** If a team has an idea for a new product or product feature, and it tests it and finds that customers don't want it, we know not to punish the team. Customer-centric companies should be rewarding individuals who come up with new ideas and test them early on—even if the idea is wrong.
5. **Notice when a customer is using a product in a way other than intended.** Assume for a moment that the customer is right and you developed the product incorrectly. There may be a way to add a new feature or even a new product that serves a whole new customer base
6. **Make it easy for customers to give feedback.** Have an 800 number on your box, a form on your Website or other means in place for customer feedback. Make sure, too, that you have a process for responding to that feedback and that you let your customers know what you do with their suggestions. Customers usually understand that you may not take every idea—but they do want some feedback.
7. **Treat your employees well.** Former UPS CEO Kent Nelson once said, "Employee satisfaction equals customer satisfaction at UPS." Take his words to heart. If your employees are proud of their company and feel good about their jobs, it will show in the way they treat your customers!

Robbie Kellman Baxter is the founder of Peninsula Strategies, a strategy consulting firm focused on helping companies accelerate growth through new markets and product offerings. Corporate clients have included industry leaders Netflix, Sun Microsystems and Oracle, as well as fast-growing private companies such as MarketTools (makers of Zoomerang) and PayCycle. She has spoken before groups including alumni associations of Stanford and Wharton, as well as several regional professional association. Frequently quoted in publications ranging from the New York Times to Inc Magazine and the eCommerce Times, Robbie earned her MBA from Stanford University and her AB from Harvard College. You can reach her at www.peninsulastrategies.com or 650-322-5655.

