

Customer Engagement: The (Often) Missing Ingredient in Certifiers' Success

Lenora G. Knapp, PhD
Knapp & Associates International, Inc.

What is customer engagement and why does it matter?

“Engagement” is your customers’ ongoing connection to your organization’s brand, staff, and certification. It is developed through every interaction and touch point in the lifetime of your customers’ relationship with you. If these interactions are positive, your customers’ emotional and psychological investment in your certification will be strengthened.

Why does this matter? Research across industry verticals has shown that engaged customers:

- buy more
- have higher retention rates
- have greater trust in the brand
- are more loyal
- are more likely to recommend or advocate for the brand or product

Customer satisfaction is not customer engagement

If you have high customer satisfaction ratings you may think you already have engaged customers. Think again. Although satisfaction is a necessary step in the process that ultimately leads to engagement, it is only the first step. These satisfied customers also must have an emotional or psychological investment in your certification. Consider the many products and services you routinely use and with which you are satisfied. With how many of these do you have a connection – one which is strong enough that you tell others about the product/service and you would remain a customer even if a less expensive option comes along? Satisfied customers who lack a bond with your certification are not engaged and have no motivation to spread the word about your certification.

What is the recipe for the “secret sauce” of customer engagement?

Step #1: Pre-heat

Before you mix together the ingredients of the secret sauce for customer engagement, you need to: (1) deeply understand your customers and (2) have a certification that *truly* satisfies their needs (vs. trying to convince them that they should want what you offer). Listen to the voice of your customers, not just through formal market research, but also through dialoguing with them, tracking what is being said about you in social media and discussion groups, and documenting comments/reactions your call center staff receive. Also, map your customer touch points and walk through each touch point in your customers’ shoes. Look for opportunities to enhance customers’ experience, foster relationships with them and create greater value for your certification. Using what you’ve learned, refine your offerings so they hit the “sweet spot” for the customer. Hitting this sweet spot is a pre-requisite to engagement.

Step #2: Add ingredients

You’re now ready to put together the basic ingredients for an engagement process. These ingredients include:

- *Putting a human face on your certification program.* Create the impression that your organization is approachable, friendly, and understanding (vs. being a “standards cop”). Let customers see and get to know the people who work behind the scenes on your program. Being human goes a long way toward engaging customers and humor – which is so rarely used by certifiers – can be especially effective in this regard.
- *Co-creating with customers.* Develop mechanisms through which customers can work in partnership with you, on an ongoing basis, to improve the certification program and the customer experience and to create greater value for the credential. A customer advisory council is one example of a co-creation mechanism. Two-way conversations help to establish and reinforce customers’ bond with the certification. (Note that the ongoing nature of co-creation, the partnership involved, and the two-way nature of the experience distinguishes it from market research.)

- *Maintaining transparency and communicating effectively.* You may already be transparent, but if you are like most certifiers, many of your customers (particularly candidates) still see the certification process as a black box. The terms we use to refer to what we do (e.g., “equating,” “scaled scores,” “criterion-referenced standard setting”) are foreign and the technical explanations we provide typically sound like hocus pocus to lay persons. Consequently, customers may not perceive your organization to be transparent even though you are sharing everything with them. Experiment to find the best messaging for your program and repeat these messages often.

Step #3: Stir in a dash of strategy

There should be a strategy underlying your engagement efforts. When developing this strategy, consider the following questions:

- What market segments or advocates do we want to engage with?
- What goals are we trying to accomplish? For example, are we trying to create emotional bonds with the certification or are we trying to encourage advocates to promote the credential?
- What is the best mechanism for engagement, given our goals and the groups we are trying to reach?
- What will motivate and appeal to customers?

Step #4: Bring to a boil

During this step you should:

- *Ignite engagement through providing regular and varied opportunities for customer interactions.* For example, this could be accomplished through a combination of blog posts, co-creation opportunities, educational and networking events, moderated online discussions, and games and contests.
- *Give customers something to talk about and to share.* When people talk about your certification, it's like free advertising, only better, because word of mouth is more effective than traditional advertising and promotions and is extremely influential in purchase decisions. Make customer advocacy and word of mouth easy. For instance, provide bite-sized chunks of content which are easy to share (e.g., video links, tweetable quotes).

Step #5: Stir frequently

Keep in mind that engagement is an ongoing process, not an isolated campaign which has a start and a finish. Make engagement opportunities a routine part of your operations.

Lastly, deliver on your promises. Ensure that customers' experience with your organization remains positive and that your certification continues to meet their needs. The alignment between your promises and what is delivered will continue to fuel engagement.