



310 East 4500 South, Suite 450
Salt Lake City, UT 84107
(800) 634-5407
www.mshare.net

Real-Time Feedback, Urgent Response

(Version 2)

By Richard D. Hanks, President
Mindshare Technologies

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Do you want your service company to win? Here's my take on how...

Listen (to your customers). **Fix** (the situation). **Do it now** (urgency and responsiveness)!

I believe that real-time feedback and urgent response are among the most powerful differentiators with winning companies in business today.

Listen in Real Time

If you're not collecting immediate feedback from customers about their service experience with you, then you are already behind. Customers no longer have to accept what you package up and give to them – there are too many other competitive choices. They want to tell you how they feel, and you'd better be listening. Why? The true benefit of real-time customer feedback is in knowing, not guessing, what your customers want, every day, at every location. No matter how good your existing market research or CRM system is, none of it is as useful as the customer personally telling you about their experience.

Think about the evolution of the words “real-time” over the generations... To our great-grandparents it might have meant weeks or even months. To my generation it generally means, “Get me the information I need within a couple of days,” or “Leave me a voice mail or an email.” To my children, real-time has taken on another meaning – it means “during” the event, “during” the service experience. The trend will certainly continue, meaning that our ability to listen and respond to our customers will need to migrate from:

What they **remember** about the experience? To...
What **just happened** at their service experience? To....
What **is happening** during their service experience?

In my opinion, comment cards and delayed surveys are already outdated. At a minimum, **every customer** should be able to easily provide immediate feedback through phone and web surveys, home page questionnaires, and toll-free call centers. These should be supplemented with outbound email or phone solicitations **to a subset** of the customer population. **Occasional** mystery shops and internal audits can also be conducted to ensure that prescribed processes are being observed.

There are a large number of service companies that haven't yet adopted these available real-time feedback methods. However, there *are* a few best-in-class companies that are moving forward and are developing methods to utilize the **next generation** of real-time feedback.

Here's a true story, just dripping with irony. I run a company that teaches and preaches real-time feedback – for example, post-meal restaurant surveys. A while back I was at dinner with some family members and I was explaining the benefits of phone and web surveys, (versus mystery shopping and comment cards) – because the guest can provide immediate feedback to our clients. As I was expounding profusely, I looked over at my 20-year-old daughter Katherine, whose thumbs were flying,

texting on her phone, and I asked her who she was “talking” to. She said, “I’m just telling Courtney how delicious this dinner is.” Welcome to my wake-up call on the new definition of real-time feedback.

Next steps? Make sure you are listening to customers immediately after their service experience, and begin thinking of ways to satisfy the future definitions of “real-time.”

Fix the Situation

After real-time feedback is collected, what do you do with it? Simple answer – if something is broken, fix it. If something is awesome, celebrate it and emulate it.

You ought to be prepared to “fix” two major things:

(1) “Fix” the customer situation. Contact them right away. Apologize for any negative issues. Describe the way you will address the issue. Offer them some kind of compensation for their troubles, and invite them to return.

(2) “Fix” the internal problem – be it person, process, or thing. Train, teach, or counsel with the problem employee. Clean up the dirty restroom, train the phone agent on accepting responsibility, or raise the standards on raw materials, etc. Whatever caused the negative issue – fix it.

When processes are in place to fix the customer and fix the internal problem, then hold managers accountable for following them.

Urgency – Act Accordingly, Act Fast!

Once your customers have told you what they want; you need to act on it. Quickly!

“Urgency” is an attitude, an approach to excellence. It doesn’t mean being harried or chaotic or out of control – it does mean being fully engaged. When he was a young man, my dad worked at a soda fountain. He loved to tell us stories about when he was the only one behind the counter and how fast he could serve people. As a kid, whenever I had to stand in line with my dad, we would carefully watch the servers and I quickly came to learn the meaning of the term “sense of urgency.”

The general state of customer service today is not pretty, as evidenced by the number of blogs and websites devoted to corporate bashing. This has led to a culture in which people don’t expect companies to even acknowledge their displeasure, let alone act on it.

It’s hard to believe I’m saying this, but for some professions (like house contractors, appliance repair, cable TV or dish installation, etc.) I have already surrendered and lowered my expectations to: “Please, just show up within an hour of your appointment and I’ll be happy!” Imagine how much word-of-mouth business a carpenter or home repairman would have if they had the authentic reputation of showing up, on time, when they said they would be there.

It's an embarrassing state of affairs that has lowered our service expectations, but your company can earn loyalty and repeat guests if you know how to be properly responsive to both positive and negative feedback. If you don't act quickly on customer feedback, then why even collect it at all?

I suggest that you take your positive responses and use them to emphasize your strengths. You can also use them to motivate and reward your staff - everyone likes to be patted on the back every once in a while. (Plus, a happy staff goes a long way toward customer happiness and loyalty.)

But what to do with the bad comments? Oddly enough, they present the perfect situation to win back a loyal customer. Research over the last 20 years has conclusively shown that guests who have their problems appropriately resolved are more loyal than those who had no problem to begin with.

The problem with most feedback systems is that there are no urgency mechanisms in place to sound the alarm when a negative comment comes through. "Customer Service Excellence" is not earned by taking negative criticism slowly or lightly. When something goes wrong, a **quick response**, on the **local level** is always the best way to win back a customer. It is in "Service Lapse Recovery" that some of your most heroic customer service experiences can occur.

One of our clients provides food for major sporting stadiums across the U.S. During a baseball game at Wrigley Field, a customer had ordered chicken strips to be delivered directly to him in his suite. When he received his meal, the chicken strips were cold. He had also received an invitation to take a Mindshare survey, and provide feedback on his experience. He called right away and complained about the cold food. Instantly, the manager received a notification on his cell phone. He went directly to his computer and pulled up this customer's information from the system. Before the game was over, he found the upset customer, apologized, and presented him with some fresh, hot chicken strips. The customer was blown away at such responsiveness.

The best automated feedback systems available have built-in logic that triggers an alert to be sent to both the local offending parties and their supervisors as soon as the feedback arrives from the guest. These systems give the local manager notice that a problem with service has occurred. They provide the contact information for the customer, along with the customer's feedback so that the manager can understand the situation, and make restitution immediately by contacting the customer, offering an apology, and "fixing" the customer (see above).

The next time the customer comes in and sees that their complaint has been addressed, they'll know you appreciate their business and will become even more loyal to your company. All you had to do was respond, offer restitution, and make good on promised improvements.

Sales forces in conference rooms around the world are trying their best to come up with value-adds that will take the pressure off of price and help them close sales. But, they often are missing the solution right under their nose: strong relationships, fostered by speed, responsive service, and urgency, make price almost irrelevant.

Football Hall of Famer Roger Staubach, hit the nail on the head when he said, "There are no traffic jams along the extra mile." You have a chance to really stand out from your competitors by creating a

culture in which negatives are turned into positives, and customers are shown that they're truly valued, by the **urgency** and **responsiveness** that you show them.

This is how I see it.

About Richard D. Hanks and Mindshare

Richard D. Hanks is the President of **Mindshare Technologies**, a leading provider of real-time, automated customer and employee feedback solutions. His experience spans multiple industries and disciplines, including many years as an adjunct professor at Cornell. He is an author and frequent teacher/speaker at trade, academic, and professional gatherings. Mindshare's business monitoring tools help companies improve operational excellence and minimize customer attrition through personal customer involvement. Mindshare's proprietary survey technology captures the voice of the customer in real-time and immediately transforms it into actionable intelligence through powerful enterprise reporting. As a hosted system, Mindshare is affordable and flexible, with surveys and reports tailored to fit a company's individual needs. For more information please visit: www.mshare.net. To reach Rich directly, contact him at rhanks@mshare.net or (801) 263-2333.