

## Converting Customers into Cheerleaders

The value of happy customers is a well established and widely accepted proposition in business, as is the usefulness of word of mouth praise. The idea that a customer would share a positive experience about your company to a friend or associate is, in fact, so welcome that there ought to be a way that companies can encourage and promote such behavior. This article is that way, and after reading it you will have a handle on how to leverage the most valid, convincing, and eager sales force you could ever hope to establish – your customers.

The conversion of a customer into a cheerleader – someone who voluntarily expresses a positive review of your product or service and actively encourages people to try it – is a process that requires three primary elements. They are:

1. An excellent value proposition
2. High quality
3. Consistency

The excellent value proposition goes to the heart of the perceived value of your product. The consumer is weighing the perceived value against the actual cost and determining whether or not the product (as it is viewed) is worth the price being demanded. If the perception is that the proposition is less than valuable or even, then the person will not cheerlead for your product. However, if the product is deemed as being of greater value than the price assigned to it, your customers can be expected to demonstrate their pleasure through loyalty, return purchases, and by engaging in praise (word of mouth marketing) of your product.

The second component necessary is high quality. While quality is not necessarily a required element for a positive value proposition (technically you could sell low quality at a very low price and be seen as having a good perceived value/price ratio), the presence of high quality is necessary if you want people talking about what you're selling to friends and associates. Keep in mind that a recommendation is akin to a personal endorsement, which then gets associated with the person who mentioned the product. If the second party, to whom it was mentioned, is not satisfied, they will, in many cases return to the person who did the recommending with complaints. Your insistence on quality will avoid any displeasure and will allow people to gain the comfort level they need to feel safe enough to make the recommendation.

Similar to the need for quality, so too is there a need for consistency. Customers will not recommend your product if they are uncertain that the great experience they had will be repeated for others. Not only won't they recommend your product, they may not return themselves if you cannot provide a consistent experience.

The conversion process from customer to cheerleader has four critical steps that, when implemented properly, brings customers to the conclusion that they want to talk up your product/service and enthusiastically recommend it to others. These four steps are:

1. Target the Right Group

You cannot rely on people to become cheerleaders if they are not enthusiastic for your offering to an extent that mandates their involvement. In order for them to arrive at this

level they need to have a need or desire that is sufficiently critical (to them) so as to make your product the answer to their needs. Therefore, you need to make certain that you are targeting the right group to become your cheerleaders. Select the group that you can make most excited.

## 2. Create an Emotional Bond

In order to excite, gain attention, motivate and inspire you need to create an emotional bond between your company, its products and your customers (especially those you target to become cheerleaders). The relationship people establish with products is born of the human tendency to develop a deep emotional bond with people and things that provide us with essential needs and comforts. This bond is demonstrated through loyalty and repeated use of the product and in some circumstances almost a reliance on the product. The task is to leverage this emotional bond so that the people who are attached to the product feel a compulsion to spread the word.

## 3. Enable them to Cheer

Some people who might like to spread the good word do not have the opportunities to do so. Your job is to provide them with ideas, channels, events, and other chances for them to talk positively about your products. Also, whenever possible you should consider offering incentive for cheerleading, although this should not be done in such a way as to dilute the validity of the cheerleading. You do not want people to think the praise is a result of the incentive, but rather the incentive is a genuine gesture of appreciation and a natural extension of the existing relationship your company already has with the cheerleaders.

## 4. Record and Track

The continuity of your program is dependent on the continued support of the people you have converted from fond patron to active cheerleader and it can only work if you maintain and monitor your relationship with them. The development of a database, the creation of appreciation events, the use of testimonials, and other devices you can devise in order to draw them into your circle and keep them there are all dependent on your ability to contact them and measure the extent of their loyalty. By doing this you will find that you are able to call upon them not only to serve as cheerleaders for promotional purposes, but also as firemen should you ever be subjected to negative press.

Cheerleaders are there to protect your reputation and expand your customer base. They willfully promote the use of your products because what you sell – and what you stand for – has genuine meaning to them. The conversion process is engaged in voluntarily, as they seek to deepen their relationship with your company and repay you for the good you bring to their lives. The cheerleader not only engages in word-of-mouth marketing on your behalf, they engage in lead generation and customer recruitment. These are crucial functions and make the effort to identify and embrace potential cheerleaders a wise and worthy business endeavor.