

Stop Exceeding Customer Expectations!

By Bob Parker, CCO - Chief Context Officer, Robert A. Parker & Associates Inc., February 3, 2011
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Last August, I had a big party. Ordered large bags of ice from a local service provider that agreed to deliver them at 2PM for my party starting at 3PM. It was an outdoor affair, and quite warm at that time of year. Needed the ice to keep drinks cool, but did not want it to melt too soon.

I can't say I know for sure what went through this service providers mind, but they definitely exceeded my expectations! The ice was delivered at 11AM in 28 degree Celsius weather. Was I delighted? Absolutely NOT!

I had nowhere to store it so it would not melt. My beverages were not set up to accept ice yet. My plans were set for the 2PM delivery, but a few hours early did not play into my plans. There was a mad scramble to make this work. To top it off, the price that was asked for was more than what had originally been agreed upon, and I certainly did not get any extra value.

Controversial I can be, but hear me out.

I've taken a lot of heat for being one to suggest that exceeding customer expectations is not the goal. Some consultant somewhere thought this was a great idea. In fact, I know exactly where it comes from, and it is often miss-interpreted. Ken Blanchard's book in the early 1990's, "Raving Fans" suggests we should give customers +1; but more importantly he demands that we understand what the customers want FIRST. At the end of the day, our intention is to delight our customers. Early delivery when I'm not ready is not helpful. Late delivery would not have been good as well. For me it raises this question. How do we know we are exceeding our customer's expectations? The short answer is, we ask. That is all Blanchard really wanted us to do. - ASK! But once an expectation is stated, it should be met, and by meeting it, we are actually not exceeding, we are executing and delivering!

This is why I'm of the mind that we must only ever meet customer expectations. Delight them with our service and delivery with what we agree to exactly when we agree to it at the price we agree to charge. Anticipating that the customer wants anything different is not listening to their unique situations and needs. We must learn however to keep asking our customer to ensure that we understand what their needs are; an undiscovered expectation can never be met... or exceeded for that matter if you really think about it, and ultimately we will fail.

Oh, then I've heard, "we must under-promise, and over-deliver!" You can probably see my head exploding as I hear this. All this manages to do is to force feed your customer with what you think their expectation 'should' be. Then, you are supposed to look like the hero when you actually exceed that? You can fool some of the people some of the time... but, eventually, customers get wise to this and realize your non-commitment is in YOUR best

interest and not THIERS. This is contemptible at best! Eventually when someone else comes along and shows them more interest, the customer will eventually leave.

Don't get me wrong, there are things that fall into the category of exceeding expectations that do delight customers, and I encourage you to find these and make them work for you. When you do however, know that they will eventually cease to become exceeds, and will ultimately become expected aspects of service delivery. You can't keep exceeding before you some day run out of room whether that be time, margin, materials or whatever. Then you are forced to only ever meet, and the concept becomes harder and harder to continue. These innovations in service delivery instead can become your competitive advantage and part of your value proposition. Ultimately, putting you ahead of your competition and in good stead with your customer. The only place you should actually exceed customers expectations is relative to your competitor's delivery.

So, at the end of the day, let's call it what it really is. What you really have is a 'value proposition'; which exceeds that of your competitors and ultimately delights all of your customers. That is first prize in my books and what we really want to achieve! Keep doing that while you consistently deliver it for each of your unique customers remembering that new innovations can always be incorporated as they are developed.

Internal Customers:

I've also been asked about performance evaluations and the exceeding expectations that are outline in performance agreements.

There are companies that use the terms under-performance standards; meet performance standards, and exceed performance standards. Bonuses are based on which of these three categories you fall into, anything from no bonus, to maximum bonus.

Again, I might be walking a fine line in semantics, but I do believe in the power of words and how interpretations can take meanings in different directions. It is my contention that employees should have value propositions as well, and employers are willing to pay for different forms of value. Perhaps we need to look at changing these terms to 'under value', 'standard value', and 'maximum value'. Maximum value gets the maximum bonus, while 'under value' employees attempt to provide rationale why someone else can't provide better value. I've never considered myself to be paid for my time, but instead for the value I provide. Tying a dollar figure to that value is one thing, but understanding the concept is quite another.

This concept of paying for value is very much understood in much of the consumer realm as we know that we often, "get what we pay for." Value is always perceived and open to interpretation, but so is the concept of exceeding. We need to clearly define what that means so we know when we have accomplished it. Again, once it is defined, we are simply meeting a different level of our value proposition.