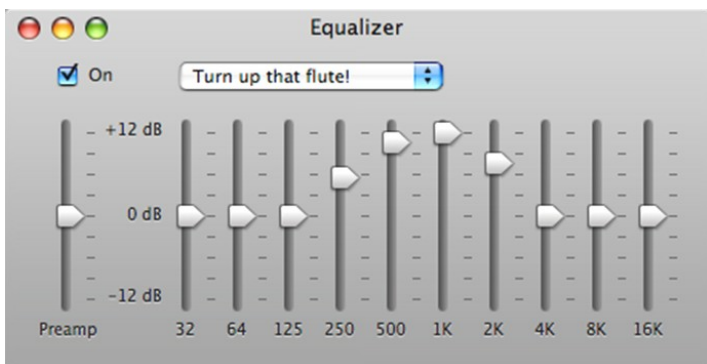


Are You Meeting, Exceeding, or Falling Short of Members' Expectations?

Brad Rucker, February 2015

There was a time when I conducted a lot of market research designed to help clients improve customer service. I came to think of customer service as a set of skills that existed in a hierarchy from easy to difficult. For example, **Interpersonal Skills** (friendliness, smiling, greeting customers, saying thank-you) are easier for employees to acquire than **Product Knowledge**, which involves a lot of training. Examples of other skills that can be included in this hierarchy are **Speed of Service**, **Accuracy**, **Empathy** (putting yourself in the customer's shoes), and at the top of the list, **Problem Solving**. I considered problem solving as the top skill because it's difficult, because employees often need experience and initiative to solve a problem, and because it's so important - nothing creates loyalty like solving a problem for a customer.



Over time, instead of thinking of skills as existing in a hierarchy (although some are more difficult to acquire than others) I've come to think of them in the way they can be adjusted to meet customer needs. We've all seen an equalizer, like the one pictured here, used to adjust the different elements of sound or the different elements of a digital image. Now replace each element of sound with an element of service. Moving the first slider button up or down would adjust the level of interpersonal skills, the second slider would adjust speed of service, the third would adjust

the importance of accuracy, and so on ... By the way, the skills and number of skills will be different for every type of business, and for different positions within a business. You can imagine, for example, that accuracy would always be important for every employee in a bank, but product knowledge would be more important for loan officers than for tellers.

There is probably a default position for each job title; a certain expectation for employees in each position. But good employees also know how to make adjustments based on the situation. When they get a customer that's in a hurry, speed of service becomes more important. When they get a customer that wants to talk, speed is less important and interpersonal skills become more important. For customers, the type of service required can change based on the situation. If you run a restaurant and the range breaks down, speed (how quickly you can get it fixed) is probably your highest priority and the service provider should recognize that fact. So, good customer service means finding the right mix – the right adjustment – of service elements for the different aspects of your business, your employees, and your customers, and, it requires being flexible ... allowing employees to be flexible to adjust to each situation.

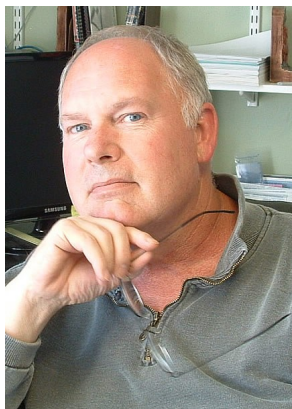
The equalizer model can be applied to trade associations and how they serve their members. I'm thinking about all the services an association provides: government affairs, information, training, access to products and services, networking opportunities, etc. You could break this out into a fairly detailed list that would include legal advice, your website, telephone assistance (problem solving/trouble shooting), providing certifications, public outreach, brand strength, and so on. The list will vary depending on the type of association.

Assign each service you provide to a slider button on the equalizer and think about how they should be adjusted; which should be turned up high and which can be turned down a bit. The problem is that no two members are alike. There is no one setting that will serve all members. Ideally, the equalizer settings should be different for every member... something that is clearly impractical.

What you can do is to think of what the ideal settings should be for different member segments. For example, for a restaurant association, you can easily imagine that small independent restaurants will have different needs from large chains. For a realtor association you can imagine that brokers will have different needs than realtors; large companies will have different needs from small ones, new members may have different needs from veteran members, and so on.

A member survey can be used to identify member priorities and how those priorities vary for different member segments. For example, all the service elements can be rated on a 1-10 importance scale. The survey can also ask members to rate the same variable according to how well the association is doing (performance); again using a 1-10 scale. The difference between importance and performance ratings, calculated for each member segment, will tell you where you are meeting, exceeding, or falling short of member expectations – not just for the membership overall, but among specific segments of the membership. It allows you to quantify how well you are meeting your mission.

You can imagine the value of this analysis in deciding how to allocate staff training and staff resources. Repeating the process every year or two will show you where you are making improvements and where more work is needed.



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In the 30 + years that I've been in the market research business I've worked for a wide range of clients in both the public and private sectors. In recent years, however, I've focused on membership organizations. People who belong to a group, whether it's a business-based association, social affiliation or loyalty program, have higher expectations than average consumers and they are more willing to share their opinions. They have a vested interest in seeing their organization succeed. That makes members a pleasure to survey and membership organizations a pleasure to work for. If you are considering a member survey or just have some general questions about market research, please get in touch.