

## Are you different – and better?

In the early 1980's, British Airways commissioned some research into the perceptions of the airline held by their existing and prospective customers. One question asked respondents to say whether they thought British Airways was better, same or worse than other airlines. When the research results were presented to BA Executives, the feedback showed that 20% of respondents thought that they were better, 15% thought that they were worse and 65% could not detect any difference. There was an audible sigh of relief from the BA executives.

That was until the researcher explained that there were two very different conclusions to be drawn from the research. The BA Executives had concluded that 85% of respondents believed BA to be as good, if not better than their competitors. The alternative interpretation was that 65% of respondents had no particular reason for flying BA. To them, it was "just another airline."

Being regarded as "just another supplier" by your customers is about the worst result that that you could experience from such a survey. The implications are twofold. The first is that your customers will not display any loyalty towards you and increasingly you will find yourself competing on the basis of price.

Of course, it is not just sufficient to be different – it's the way in which you are different that counts. You need to be different in a way that promises some form of benefit to your customers or target market.

Do you remember the De .. De .. De .. Decoré hair shampoo ad with various members of the family all singing along with the "wrong" voices to the old Duke of Earl hit? It was immensely successful in rejuvenating a tired brand in a ferociously competitive market segment but researchers discovered a curious fact. Sales shot up when the TV ads were on but dropped off steadily when they had finished. There did not seem to be much brand loyalty and the reason for this was that the shampoo wasn't positioned to offer consumers a clear benefit - no split ends, easy to manage, everyday use etc. The ad certainly implied that it was a family shampoo but consumers bought Decoré because of the jingle. It was simply top-of-mind.

The shampoo was different – the jingle saw to that - but not better<sup>1</sup>.

So if you want loyal customers – and who doesn't – then it's not just sufficient to be different, you have to demonstrate how being different also makes you better.

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<sup>1</sup> Have a look at the range of Decoré shampoos these days. There are shampoos for dry hair, fine hair, frequently washed hair, coloured hair and damaged hair.

For instance, one aspect of the Customer Feedback Surveys that distinguishes bpi's from others is that one person is responsible for all stages of the survey from survey design to interpretation of the feedback. That same person also conducts all the interviews. Now that's different – it's also time consuming and a lot of patience and experience is required to obtain the interviews and to know when and how to explore comments and issues in greater depth. However, that difference is one of the things that make them better. Clients always want to know why their customers rate them the way they do.

Many people that I speak to complain that there is no loyalty among their customers like there used to be in "the good old days". I think that's bullshit. It's not a lack of loyalty that customers suffer from; it's a lack of tolerance. Unlike the good old days, customers are no longer prepared to put up with poor quality and second rate service from "just another supplier".

Many years ago, I did a survey for a small accounting practice that was becoming concerned about the lack of new clients although they assured me they had a good customer base of loyal long-term ones. My job was to find out why these clients had remained so loyal. The first clue to emerge was that all the companies, whose owners I interviewed, were pretty unimpressive in their own right. My conclusion was that it was not loyalty that bound them to their accountant but inertia. The accountant was "just another accountant" so why change if the perception is that they are all the same?

The problem for the "just another supplier" is that there are far fewer "just another customers" than there used to be.

So ask yourself - what makes my business different from those of my competitors? And how does that difference make it better?