Do Market Research Agencies Really Understand Their Clients?

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Do Market Research Agencies Really Understand Their Clients? Written by Susan Rogers, Rogers InternationalHere is a little storyâ€¦.. Understanding the customer
As a child, I was the envy of all my school friends. My dad, not only had a sweet shop â€“ but we lived right above it! I would help out at weekends, and one of the golden rules that was drummed into me from day one, after moaning about an especially difficult customer was, â€œthe customer is always rightâ€•. â€œBut dad!!!!â€• Iâ€™d exclaim indignantly, yet his resp â€œno, the customer is always rightâ€•.
We knew the customer to the extent that weâ€™d second-guess his needs. The old boy on a Friday night who always ordered a pound of Liquorice Allsorts (with the 100â€™s and 1000â€™s ones taken out of course), would be delighted when the packet was ready and waiting for him each week. He felt special. He felt valued.
Understanding the customer politics and decision makers though could be a little more tricky. For example, the mum who would come in with the kids one day, and say they couldnâ€™t have any sweets this week because theyâ€™d been naughty, ye the next day, little Johnny would sneak in with twopence heâ€™d found, to buy a couple of Flying Saucers.
There were several families in the neighbourhood who couldnâ€™t afford Easter eggs and also seemed to have difficulty in saving money â€“ so we started an â€œEaster egg savings fundâ€• whereby they could put sixpence away a week towards thei chocolate luxuries. We had to tune in to their individual needs and assist them with their specific buying strategies.

We also had to nurture customers through difficult periods. For example, decimalisation. A month before decimalisation came in, my father had some cardboard â€œnew moneyâ€• and each evening after tea, Iâ€™d have 20 minutes of â€œplayingâ so that on the day of decimalisation I was able to coach and nurture the customers through what was then, quite a traumatic change in their lives.

Always give that little bit extra, my dad would say â€“ and expect nothing back in return. A quarter pound of sweets would always be â€œ a quarter and a bitâ€• and if the scales rested exactly on the quarter â€“ then an extra Sherbet Lemon would be added for good measure. All customers buying boxes of chocolates for Mother Day could have them wrapped and ribboned for free. Of course we did get something back â€“ we gained and retained customer loyalty.
Most loved to have a chat over the counter, telling you about their holidays or problems, or expound their views on current affairs of the day. By listening and nodding and most importantly remembering, the customer didnâ€™t see you as the â€œshop assistantâ€•, but as part of their extended friendship group to the extent they would ask advice on a broad range of non sweet related subjects. They may have done their main shopping at the local grocers or supermarket, where they could have bought preprepared bags of sweets â€“ but they didnâ€™t - they would always pop into our shop for their sugared candies. The added value from their understanding shopkeeper, was well worth paying the extra few pennies.
Be prepared to say â€œno!â€• dad would say â€“ for example to the gobby youths who would try to take advantage when he wa absent, pretending they were old enough to buy a packet of 10 Players, and Iâ€™d pluck up the courage and ban them from the shop. The hassle just wasnâ€™t worth the additional income.
My grandfather, although retired, would occasionally pop down to the shop to help out. He had what I always called, the Frankie Howard approach to customers - very up front and challenging. This approach of course wasnâ€™t suitable for everyone, but grandfather was a pro and knew this, selecting his targets extremely carefully. Then of course there would be the one or two customers who quite frankly I just didnâ€™t like and Iâ€™d squirm if I saw them entering the shop, as howeve hard I tried, I just couldnâ€™t connect with them. We very quickly learned that one of the other shop assistants could banter with them â€˜til the cows came home, so when such customers entered in the future, we would seamlessly glide into our appropriate places so that the staff member that gelled with them, would serve them.
Traditional principles â€“ but enduring added value.
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