

Transcript: Best Practices in Customer Engagement (Using Consumer Feedback to Improve the Customer Experience), Dana Barton. AccessibilityPlus 2022.

Hello, thank you for joining me today. My name is Dana Barton. I'm going to be speaking about Best Practices in Customer Engagement and how you can use consumer feedback to improve the customer experience. As I said, my name is Dana Barton, and I'm the Director of Meeting the Challenge.

We are a disability compliance consulting firm located in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and we conduct accessibility audits nationally. A lot of the work that we do is working with Title II entities, states, and local governments on self-evaluation and transition planning.

We also work with Title III or public accommodations with their accessibility audits. So this would be entities like retail, restaurants, hotels. Title III says that private businesses that are open to the public must give individuals with disabilities the same access to goods and services that their non-disabled customers enjoy. Meeting the Challenge also operates the Rocky Mountain ADA Center, one of six federally funded centers in the United States that provides information, training, and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. I believe you've heard from Emily Shuman, the Director of the ADA Center, today as well.

So the first thing that I want to talk about is customer engagement. There are many definitions of customer engagement. The first definition is said to have appeared in 2006 through the Advertising Research Foundation. Here are two definitions that I'm particularly drawn to.

The first is from Forbes, and it says that customer engagement is "an interaction between an external consumer or customer and an organization through various channels." The second definition is from the World Federation of Advertisers, and it says that customer engagement is "creating deep connections with customers that drive purchase decisions and interaction and participation over time."

To take it one step further, I think it's a good idea also just to really define what is a customer. A customer is the recipient of a good service, product, or idea obtained from a seller, vendor, or supplier via a financial transaction or exchange of money or some other valuable consideration.

In essence, everyone is a customer. Whether you're a small business, an educational institution, or a government entity, you have customers and the work that all of us do provides either a good, product, or service or idea to another person or entity.

There are five different types of customer markets. So I want to outline this for you, so no matter what industry you're in, you can kind of wrap your mind around where you might fit into a customer market.

So the first is Business to Customer. And this is the process of selling the products and services directly between a business and a consumer who is the intended end-user. So an example of this would be a grocery store selling groceries to you as an individual.

The second is Business to Business, and this refers to commerce between two or more businesses. So example, when the grocery store owner uses the services of an accounting firm to audit their accounts. The third is Customer to Business, which is where a consumer or an individual creates value and businesses consume that value.

So an example might be an individual who makes jam and sells that jam to the grocery store owner to be sold to the to the consumer or the customer. We have Customer to Customer customer markets, and this is where customers sell goods to one another.

So this example would be on eBay or Etsy, where consumers sell goods to other consumers. It's direct. And then the last is Government to Citizen, and this is where the government is selling products or providing services to the citizens of their municipality.

So, for example, when you pay taxes or have land or vehicle registration, you are paying for the services of that government entity. So hopefully that gives you an idea of where you might fit in into the customer experience.

I want to talk a little bit about customers with disabilities. People with disabilities represent the third largest market segment in the United States. According to the CDC, 26% of adults in the United States have a disability. Now, these statistics vary depending on where you're gathering your data, and that all kind of depends on how people like to self-disclose if they have a disability, where we are in the census, et cetera. Globally, the market of people with disabilities is estimated to control \$13 Trillion of disposable income, and this number comes from a 2020 report called the Global Economics of Disability.

In the US alone, people with disabilities control \$1.28 Trillion in disposable income. So that is a lot of disposable income that can come to you in your business, to your government entity, et cetera. There's a lot of disposable income from people with disabilities, regardless of your industry, public or private.

A recent study found that organizations that prioritize accessibility have about 28% in higher revenue. So there's a lot of revenue to be gathered when you are marketing to your customers with disabilities. And on top of that, you can't forget about friends and family of people with disabilities.

They represent a large group of consumers who identify and the functionality that they're looking for is critical to making purchasing decisions. When you combine individuals with disability along with their friends and family. 73% of the global consumer marketplace is touched by this group of people. So again, it is critical

when you are looking at customer engagement and customer feedback that you consider this group of individuals. So we want to talk a little bit about customer feedback. Customer feedback is a collection of information from customers about their experiences with your service and your products.

Asking for feedback sends a message that your organization has a genuine interest in the experiences of your customers. When you analyze and collect customer feedback, it can be really valuable for improving your services and your products. Customers tend to reciprocate with a stronger sense of engagement and a commitment to your brand.

Customer feedback can be used to make sure you're meeting the customer requirements. When you gather customer feedback, it points out aspects of your product that might need improvement. But listening to the customer and getting their feedback again makes them feel involved and important.

Good customer feedback generates personal recommendations, and it can help you convince customers to come back for more. It also can help you acquire new customers. When you listen to that feedback, maybe make a couple of changes, you've opened up your marketplace to a different and additional sector of individuals.

When you get negative feedback, some entities are maybe worried about getting negative feedback. But if you receive negative feedback, you can use that to sell the product. To say to your customers, "Hey, we listened to you. We've made some adjustments and we care about you."

And again, that that builds that brand loyalty. So you might be thinking, how can you get feedback? And so I've outlined a few different ways to get feedback. First, is verbally. Speak with your customers face-to-face, ask them at the point-of-sale.

How was your experience? You can call them. Some customers are going to prefer this direct method of a live chat, a phone call, that personal touch. You might want to follow up directly after the purchase or service. For example, I recently had a hot water heater go out and had someone come in and install that hot water heater. And they checked back in with me a week later to make sure everything was going well and to get that feedback. Things were going great. I didn't have any issues. But just this week, my mother-in-law's hot water heater went out and she was looking for someone to come in and install new hot water heater. And immediately I gave her the name of this company that I had used because I had had such a good customer experience, and I knew that they would follow up and treat my mother-in-law well. So that's an example of some verbal feedback.

You might enable reviews on your website so you can ask for feedback within your applications. You might have a live chat support. You could ask for service and product feedback with different pop-ups and buttons. But you do need to make sure that these methods are accessible, and I caution you to be really careful with automated accessibility solutions as they could miss the mark in some areas. A lot

of what you see when you hear from automated accessibility solutions is that they can make your entire website flawless and accessible with one line of code.

And that sounds really great. But you also have to think about your content creators and how they're using language, things like contrast, font size, et cetera, that can't be fixed with a line of code. So, be careful when you use those solutions, make sure that you're digging in a little bit further.

Another way to get feedback is through the creation of surveys and polls. So you might email a survey and ask your customers for a testimonial or a review. You could have a survey on the page of your website.

You can have a survey in person at the point-of-sale. However, if you're going to ask for feedback in person, you really need to focus on staff training. This should go without saying, but training on how to interact with customers with disabilities is going to go a long way in enhancing your customer engagement.

Another way to get feedback is to monitor your social media. First thing I want to mention is have you thought about whether or not your social media is accessible? And do you know what that means? You need to understand your target audience. Different audiences that you might have and how they use and interact with social media.

Have you thought about whether or not your hashtags are camel case or if you use emojis in the middle of your content? That can be a real turnoff for a person with a disability who's using a screen reader and isn't going to be able to get through your post.

The other thing you want to think about in social media is whether or not someone might post something to your account about accessibility. Do you have a content creator who is able to respond swiftly and accurately? The other thing with social media is that a lot of them have content management analysis built-in, use it.

Look to see when people are engaging with your content, how they're engaging, where they're engaging from. This will give you a lot of information in order to enhance your social media content for your customers. In talking about feedback, I've mentioned making sure that the means by which you gather feedback is accessible.

So the first thing I want to mention is reviewing physical accessibility. Title III requirements for businesses say that you need to modify policies and practices that discriminate against individuals with disabilities, that you need to comply with access design standards when you modify or build new structures that you remove existing barriers and existing structures where you can do that in a readily achievable fashion, and that you need to provide auxiliary aids and services to ensure effective communication with individuals who might have hearing, sight, or speech impediments. Accessibility is a crucial but sometimes overlooked aspect of customer satisfaction and retention.

If a customer cannot use your product or your service easily, they're probably going to go do business elsewhere. If they can't get into your storefront, your brick and mortar, you're going to go to the shop next door. So we want to make sure that you have accessible means to gather feedback and collect feedback.

And the first would be removing physical obstacles. So this could be either in the built environment or with technology. So I've talked about kind of removing some of those barriers to entry. If a person can't park and have an accessible route into your brick and mortar, they're not going to come shop there or spend their money there. But also within technology. If someone can't access your website, if you're doing commerce online, they're going to go find another place to do that. So I encourage you to seek out platforms that are accessible and built using the WCAG 2.1 guidelines. Another way to gather feedback is accessible customer service surveys and comment cards. So you want to look at alternate formats to provide feedback. This might be a comment card that has large print, so a person with a visual disability is able to see the questions that you're asking.

It might be allowing an alternate format for someone to provide that feedback if they're not able to use pen and paper, where they can do that verbally. When you are creating surveys, it's important to use plain language and short sentences.

You need to make sure that your questions are very clear and they avoid unnecessary jargon. And if you're administering these surveys online, that you've tested the surveys using a screen reader. Another way to gather feedback is product usability interviews or a mystery shopper.

Product usability interviews can be crucial in evaluating all aspects of accessibility. It involves finding some people with disabilities, maybe a few people, asking them to complete tasks on prototypes or observing them interacting with your prototype or your product, and then taking the time to discuss accessibility issues with them.

You want to also make sure that your meetings are accessible too. So when you're holding those meetings, if you need an interpreter or sign language interpreter that you have that available. Another way that you can do that is user testing on your website.

So, for example, one of our clients currently is a credit union, and they are looking at the accessibility of their communications for their members and how people may access their online portal. And so it's not just enough to look at the code and have a couple of users test the front-end of this banking website.

We're actually having users go into the backside and trying to transfer money from one account to another. How does that work for the individual? And we have user testers. We work with an individual who is blind, an individual who is deaf, a person with low vision, and then an individual who has mobility disability and can't use a mouse. They've got a tab through everything. So we're going to have these individuals go through the backend and perform the functions that any of us would

want to perform on our online banking to make sure that we've we've thought of everything.

So this would be an example of kind of a product usability interview or an example of that. And then in gathering feedback, I think it's important that every organization have an established grievance procedures. So that if a person does come to you and says I'm having trouble accessing this or using this service, getting to this product, that you don't have someone just say, "OK, I'll let someone know." But that you have a formal set of procedures and you can follow up with that customer. Following up with customers is just as important as gathering the feedback and what you do with that feedback and again, letting your customers know what an important part of your business they are. So I want to point out the Disability Equality Index or the DEI. It's an initiative between Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities. It is a report, or they produce a report, and an index that informs companies of best and emerging practices towards peers in the business community that are achieving disability inclusion and equality. So this this report shows trends of disability inclusion across all sorts of different businesses and points out opportunities for improvement. It's unique. It's a comprehensive report, and it focuses on all aspects of disability inclusion. It specifically looks into different categories such as culture and leadership, accessibility across the enterprise or the organization, employment practices, community engagement, supplier diversity, what's happening outside the United States versus inside the United States. And it's really a benchmarking tool that can help companies build a road map of measurable and tangible actions that they can take to achieve disability, inclusion, and equality.

And it serves as something to look to for your organization. So I encourage you if you haven't heard of this yet, to look at DEI. They rate the best places to work. They give different scores, and a score of 100 does not necessarily mean that they are perfect in disability inclusion.

I'm not sure we can ever fully achieve that since this is so individualized, but it may give you some ideas of how to integrate disability, inclusion, and equality within your workplace. I've gone through the DEI, and I want to share with you some best practices of companies who are doing some stuff that's really cool.

So the first best practice I want to point out is Delta Airlines. They have an Advisory Board on Disability. They say, "our Advisory Board on Disability promotes accessibility for all of our customers by providing recommendations to Delta related to compliance, training policies, procedures and anything that impacts the travel experience of people with disabilities when they travel by air." All advisory board members are individuals with different disabilities who are already Delta frequent fliers, and they've invited these existing customers and asked for their input. Their Senior Vice President of Corporate Safety, Security and Compliance said, "between seeking counsel from people with disabilities to creating inclusive marketing materials, Delta is continuously making strides to become more inclusive by

engaging people with disabilities and addressing their concerns, opposition and support." So this group meets a couple of times a year. Again, existing customers who are already using that product, acting almost like a focus group to give feedback.

Another best practice that I want to highlight is with Google. They have a Central Accessibility Team and they say, "we invite people to participate in user research in order to develop a deeper understanding on how usable our platforms are and ways to improve them.

We also partner with organizations outside of Google to collaborate on joint initiatives and user training." So this Central Accessibility Team spans all sorts of different roles across Google, from software engineers, product and program managers, user experience designers, researchers, and testers.

And what's pretty cool about it is that a lot of the products that have been created for accessibility within Google, and outside of Google, have the potential to become useful for everyone. When you think about inventions like the typewriter, books on tape, closed captioning like we're using today, voice enabled TV, voice controls... I know I use the voice control on my remote for my television. These were all initially meant to focus on people with disabilities, but ultimately found that they could be used in a much broader sense. So this just goes to show that the accessibility problems or opportunities that we have today can lead to technology breakthroughs in the future.

Another thing that Google has done, which I think is pretty awesome, is they have partnered with Champions Place. This is a residence for young people with physical disability that doubles as a user research center for companies that are developing accessible products.

Their facility is in Georgia, and Google has provided hardware that helps residents control their environment with their voice. So among these products are things like the Nest Hub Max, which residents use to open and operate their blinds or their doors.

They've also provided eating utensils designed for people with tremors and limited hand motions. So this is all part of Alphabet, which is now Google's, I guess, bigger parent company, their life sciences division. But it's just one way that their almost that user usability study in an interview.

This is the way that Google's using that, which is pretty awesome. The next company that I want to highlight is Tommy Hilfiger or Tommy Adaptive. They do a lot of focus groups and they are also working with Champions Place, much like Google, and they've provided residents with bedding and furniture and adaptive clothing.

But what Tommy Hilfiger has said is "we've hosted extensive focus groups and gathered valuable feedback on products. Our patent-pending magnetic zipper, for

example, was originally designed for someone with a limb difference. That was a significant issue. It quickly became clear that being able to zip and unzip a jacket with one hand was a feature that everyone could appreciate." And the way that Tommy Adaptive came about is Tommy Hilfiger actually is the father of Autistic children and experienced firsthand how hard it was for his children to get dressed. In his mind, he said, quote, "picking out your clothes for the day should be a joy and not a chore.

Everyone deserves to feel good in their clothes and have independence." So his adaptive line began with a young boy who wanted to wear jeans to school, and he has muscular dystrophy, and buttons and zippers were really challenging for this individual and the legs of jeans would not fit over his leg braces.

And so the Tommy Hilfiger team had heard about this mother who was staying up late and adding velcro along the inseams of jeans and then would like hurry to school during her lunch break and the child's lunch break to help him go to the bathroom, just so her son could wear jeans and fit in like the other kids. And ultimately, Tommy Hilfiger said "we got to do something" and Tommy Adaptive was born. And they've said it's important to keep putting the consumer at the heart of their processes and working directly with the community so they can innovate their collection.

So one thing that all of these best practices have in common is that they have engaged disability groups. So in my work, a lot of the work we do, as I said at the very, very beginning, is working with state and local governments on self-evaluation and transition plans.

And the Americans with Disabilities Act says that when a state or local government is going to put this transition plan out, they need to gather input from the public. And so a lot of what I do is gathering that input from a city or a county as we are working on their transition plan.

And I can give you an example. Recently, I was working with a city and they had over 120 parks that we had identified within their city limits and we needed to address barrier removal on, quite frankly, all 120 parks. And this amount of work had to be or will have to be completed over time. You know, budgets are not endless. And so the city drafted a plan that would prioritize park improvements and removing barriers for accessibility over the next decade.

And we gathered information from the city and listed out how we're going to do that. But once the public had a chance to review prioritization, we learned that we needed to reprioritize the order in which the parks would be remediated based on the feedback of citizens with disabilities.

While hearing from the general public is great and all of your consumers is important, the focus of what we're talking about today and in the work that I do, is hearing from people with disabilities to understand where there's the greatest need for improvement.

So when you're gathering feedback from consumers with disabilities, we recommend that you engage with local disabilities groups and take a look at what advocacy groups are in your area and engage with them. You can look at Independent Living Centers.

Those are everywhere across the nation. Your city may have a Mayor's Council for People with Disabilities. You can engage with the Arc, the American Association of People with Disabilities, Easter Seals, or Goodwill Industries. There are a lot of different groups.

So connect with those groups and ask them to link a survey that you might have to their website or provide it in a newsletter. Ask them if you can host a focus group or a user usability interview at their location.

This is a great way to draw out feedback from the disability community. There is a key saying in the disability community and specifically within the independent living movement, which is "nothing about us without us." So as you think today about customer engagement, remember that people with disabilities are ready to contribute their lived experiences to problem solving, and they deserve a seat at the table. I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say we don't have customers with disabilities, and I think "really? 26% of the population has a disability and you don't see any of those individuals?"

Maybe it's time to think about why that might be. And to bring individuals with disabilities into the conversation. So again, because one of every four adults in America has a disability, it should be a part of your practice to make sure that the disability population is represented.

If you aren't engaging with your disabled customer base, you are leaving profits on the table. So that is what I have today. I want to share my contact information with you. Again, my name is Dana Barton. I'm the Director of Meeting the Challenge.

My phone number is here (719) 433-7644 and I would love to engage with you if you have further questions.

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