

When Is a Cappuccino Not a Cappuccino?

Address unspoken needs to achieve ultimate customer satisfaction

ONE OF MY most powerful and lasting insights into unspoken customer needs occurred while I was taking a course on quality function deployment (QFD) offered by Goal QPC in Boston many years ago. As a class, we had gone to a nearby restaurant for lunch. As is my habit, I ordered a cappuccino at the end of my meal, only to be disappointed that the restaurant did not offer specialty coffees.

When we returned to the classroom, the instructor used my experience to explore the idea of unspoken customer needs.

“What did Diane want at the restaurant?” he asked the class.

“A cappuccino,” replied one of my classmates.

“No, what did she really want?” pushed the instructor.

“Perhaps she was cold and wanted a warm drink?” proposed one classmate.

“Maybe she wanted to feel special. We all had coffee, but she had to have a cap-

puccino,” proposed another. “Ouch,” said my inner voice.

Then a voice rang out from the back of the class, “Perhaps she wanted a relaxing ritual.”

Chills went up my spine as I realized that is exactly why I drink cappuccino—something, until that moment, I never fully understood. I want the whole experience of smelling the beans, hearing them ground, watching the baristas do their magic latte art, and then sitting by a window watching the world go by as I savor my cappuccino. I would not have been satisfied if the restaurant had added hot water to an instant, packaged cappuccino, even though the restaurant may have thought they were satisfying my spoken need.

Understanding unspoken customer needs is a 10 on the Richter scale of customer satisfaction. Knowing that I, and likely many others, crave a relaxing ritual,

savvy business owners could meet that need with English high tea or a Japanese tea ceremony.

In his famous model for understanding customer needs, Noriaki Kano called this the area of customer delight (see Figure 1). Far beyond understanding and satisfying expected or traditional customer needs, understanding and addressing unspoken customer needs is the frontier of true competitive advantage. That is, at least, until this area of customer delight becomes the new normal, at which time meeting those needs become expected.

How can we understand the unspoken needs of customers, when customers themselves are unaware? Several approaches show great promise, including:

- Going to *gemba*; in other words, unobtrusively observing your customers as they use your product or service.
- Tapping into the right brain by using collages.
- Design thinking approaches, such as those pioneered by Stanford University.¹
- Quality tools and approaches, such as QFD.

Try using these tools to understand unspoken customer needs. The joy of truly delighting your customers is the prize that awaits you. **QP**

REFERENCE

1. Stanford University, “Use Our Methods,” <http://dschool.stanford.edu/use-our-methods>.



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Kano model for understanding customer requirements / FIGURE 1

