



## Have You Forgotten to Drain the Swamp?

By Barbara Reed

Last week a client commented that the state of the economy has presented his company with a whole new set of challenges. Though not insurmountable, they were taking considerable time and energy to resolve. He is finding that several of his resources are shutting down or cutting back production, hence his company is sent scrambling trying to find new suppliers and vendors to fulfill customer orders. I pointed out that his customers were no doubt facing the same type of challenges and asked how his company has changed to meet their customers' changing needs. He responded "That's a very good question. We've been so busy taking care of our own issues, we haven't given that much thought."

I couldn't help but flash back in my mind to a piece of paper my dad used to have hanging in his office that read "When you're up to your (insert body part here) in alligators, it's difficult to remember that your original objective was to drain the swamp." It served as a subtle, yet humorous reminder to not get sidetracked and lose sight of the big picture.

Customers are the lifeblood of any organization. Increasingly, companies are struggling to keep their customers loyal. Customer satisfaction and retention efforts simply cannot fall by the wayside no matter how hard the alligators are biting. So, how do we refocus our attention and efforts back on meeting customer needs?

There's no magic bullet, but having a checklist and game plan to focus the organization on meeting changing customer needs and looking for new opportunities can help cut through the clutter.

If this exercise seems daunting in the face of your own economic and business battles, remember that the changes do not have to be sweeping or instituted all at the same time. The goal is to identify the needs and opportunities first. Go after the low-hanging fruit and make the changes that can be implemented easily. Then you can move on to the tougher issues that require more research and planning to implement.

For example, one company was encountering customers who were hesitant to sign up for a long-term contract and reluctant to spend money. They now offer pre-payment discounts, monthly billing, the ability to add services on a pay-as-you-go basis and 0% financing for larger projects. We revised their contracts to simplify the options and included free value-added services as part of their services packages. Service offerings were re-packaged into basic, bare-bones services, comprehensive packages and customized pick-your-own services options. Based upon changing customer needs, programs were redesigned for maximum flexibility. The key to this strategy is to refine your deliverables to meet the real needs of your customers.

**To get back in touch with your customers' changing needs and address them, start by stopping.**

### **Step 1: Step Away**

Schedule a time to walk away from fighting your own battles to focus on how the economic climate has changed the way your customers do business.

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### **Step 2: Get in Touch**

Start the internal discussion with a list of questions to identify customers' changing needs. Be sure to include sales, customer service, operations and other customer-facing groups. Where is your customers' pain?

### **Step 3: Reach Out**

Validate the feedback you received from employees by contacting your customers face-to-face, via phone, e-mail, surveys, blog comments, feedback functionality on your Web site, etc. Or better yet, a combination of multiple methods to reach the most people. Listen to what customers say – and what they don't tell you as well.

### **Step 4: Start Planning**

Summarize the information you have gathered and put together a plan to address the way your customers are now doing business. How can you meet their needs, solve their problems, make their job easier or make your company easier to do business with? Start with short-term plans you can implement in the near future to show customers that you really listened and to stimulate your business. Create a plan, task forces, engage outside experts or whatever resources you will need to address longer-term solutions.

### **Step 5: Communicate**

One of the main reasons why people do not take the time to provide feedback is that they do not believe any action will result from the communication. Let customers know that you have listened and that you WILL respond. Don't just give customers lip service. Tell them precisely what you learned and what you plan to do about it.

### **Step 6: Take Action!**

The most critical part of this process is to ensure that you have the manpower and structure to implement your plan. Keep the process simple, automate what you can or outsource it to someone who can handle it for you. Whatever your plan of action may be to adapt to changing customer needs, make sure you can follow through.

### **Step 7: Follow-up**

Keep the lines of communication open and the conversation flowing to determine the success of your efforts. Fine tune your plan from the resulting feedback.

### **Step 8: Keep Going**

One thing is certain – your customers' needs will continue to change. Don't stop listening – or responding. You can bet your competitors won't.

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