

# The Next Step in Customer Service:

## ***Becoming a Trusted Advisor***

Rather than focusing on one-time profits, savvy organizations are concentrating on building strong, trust-based relationships with their customers.

By [Cynthia Clark](#) | Published 03/11/2013 in [1to1 Magazine](#)



Trust is increasingly becoming an essential quality in business. Apart from expecting great service, customers regularly look out for this differentiator when determining with which organizations they want to conduct business.

In order to tap into this precious quality, forward-thinking organizations are moving away from focusing on making a one-time profit and instead working hard to build a strong trust-based connection with their customers. These companies are taking on a new role, and turning their client-facing staff into trusted advisors to their customers. "They are differentiating themselves through customer experience," notes Wilson Raj, global customer intelligence director at [SAS](#).

According to Wayne Neu, Ph.D., assistant professor of Marketing at California State University San Marcos; Gabriel Gonzalez, Ph.D., clinical associate professor of Marketing at Arizona State University; and Michael Pass, Ph.D., associate professor of Marketing at Sam Houston State University, the role of a trusted advisor is to help their clients reduce uncertainty when making a decision. In a [Keller Center Research Report](#), Neu, Gonzalez, and Pass note that a trusted advisor needs to help customers make better decisions by giving them the right information. "At the core of an agent's ability to perform the role of a [trusted advisor] is a high degree of reciprocal trust and trustworthiness formed with the client," they explain. The result is that customers are able to make better decisions that will benefit them. For example, an employee at a telecommunications organization can alert a customer about a mobile plan that's more suitable to his needs, even if it means that the client will be paying less. Although the company will lose money in the short term, the customer is more likely to trust the organization and remain loyal.

While customers are increasingly expecting trust-based relationships with the brands they do business with, the rarity of these occurrences mean that clients are pleasantly surprised when they happen, notes Don Peppers, founding partner of *Peppers & Rogers Group* and co-author of *Extreme Trust: Honesty as a Competitive Advantage*. However, Peppers believes that within a few years,

customers will come to expect that the organizations they do business with act as trusted advisors. This customer-driven trend means that it will become the norm for organizations to take on the role of trusted advisors and train their staff members to build trust-based relationships with customers.

Turkish bank [Yapi Kredi](#) is a firm believer in the need to make sure that it understands and respects its customers' needs. "We needed to offer the customer what he really needs and wants, not what we want to sell," says Arzu Umur, the organization's director of CRM and campaign management. In order to have a better understanding of these needs, Yapi Kredi implemented a strong analytical structure that allows the organization to have a better vision of its customers and use the information to help customers make the right financial choices.

In this regard, data plays a crucial part in organizations' goals to be considered as trusted advisors since it allows them to not only take action after a customer reports a problem, but also provides the knowledge to enable employees to proactively reach out to clients to offer solutions before an issue surfaces. SAS' Raj notes that forward-thinking companies are evolving the notion of a customer service center into a role that includes using customer data to make the best offer or recommendation to clients. This gives agents the necessary information to proactively offer customers additional value through relevant products or services.

## **An Uphill Battle**

Organizations that want to create a trust-based relationship with their customers have an uphill battle. Charles Green, CEO of *Trusted Advisor Associates*, notes that there has been a gradual decline in customer trust. "People are less trusting," Green says. "So those who figure out how to be trusted are in a better position." Green notes that organizations which manage to establish themselves as trusted advisors will not only benefit by standing out from among their competitors, but they will also reap economic advantages since trust-based relationships are likely to last longer and transactions can be carried out quicker.

## **Instilling trust within the whole organization**

The recipe for companies to be considered as trusted advisors to their clients lies in ensuring that every part of the organization, from the top down, acts in a trustworthy way. Peppers notes that trust is built when business leaders or any other customer representatives treat customers the way they themselves want to be treated. "If everyone has that motive, you're going to have an extremely trustworthy organization," he says.

Agents cannot be experts in everything and these limitations might prevent customers from making the right purchasing decisions. Joe McFadden, [Salesportal's](#) vice president of marketing, believes that this challenge can be overcome by forming strategic partnerships with other organizations. "Expanding your reach through partnerships can help improve the customer experience," he explains. McFadden uses the example of a realtor who is helping a first-time buyer find the right property and can help the customer find the right loan broker, insurance provider, and a contractor. "The trend is to provide the customer with access to the right expertise," he notes.

Finally, a trust-based relationship is not only a win for businesses and their clients; employees also stand to gain from this trend. "Employees love to work for companies that are trustable," Peppers

notes. "They want to be proud of the company they work for." Raj agrees, explaining that when companies instill trusting relationships, employees feel that their roles are more valued and strategic for the organization.



#### About the Author

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