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Core Values and Core-Value

by Dr. Mike Armour

Ethics are suddenly in the national spotlight. Daily headlines scream the tale of corporate scandal and professional misconduct, even among high church officials.

In response, businesses big and small are reassessing their behavior. They are revising policies in light of core values. So, too, are churches and non-profits.

Going forward, organizations must zero in on core values. Customers, stockholders, and constituencies will demand it. Over the months ahead, expect countless PR campaigns centered on organizational values.

Identifying "Core-Value"

In addition to core values businesses, professionals, and non-profits should also focus on what we might call "core-value." You provide "core-value" when your product or service helps your "customer" attain what he or she values highly.

Core values and core-value are two different things. Core values center on what *you* value. Core-value centers on what your customer values. (And we use the word "customer" here to include your clients if you are a professional, or your constituency if you lead a non-profit.)

Core values drive your business. Or at least they should. "Core-value" generates the customer loyalty and enthusiasm on which you depend.

To identify core values, you gaze inwardly. You look deep within yourself. But to identify core-value, you must get outside yourself. You must step inside your customer's view of the world to see what he or she finds valuable.

What's Your Core-Value?

When asked why customers come to them, businesses and non-profits commonly identify their core-value as one of the following:

1. It's our product.
2. It's our pricing.
3. It's our quality.
4. It's our selection.
5. It's our service.

Actually, your core-value is none of these. They merely represent the features of your business. You're excited about these features, and rightly so. Which makes it easy to assume that customers and clients share your excitement.

In truth, they don't. Their excitement (if any) has little to do with your products and services. Rather, it hinges on *what they can accomplish* with your products and service. Absent that benefit, they will have little enthusiasm for what you offer.

What Does the Customer Value?

Just like you, customers have a hierarchy of values. Within that hierarchy are core values (or primary values) surrounded by a supporting array of secondary values. Customers buy your services or products to further one or more of their values, either primary or secondary.

So, ask yourself, "When customers or clients come to me, what specific value(s) are they hoping to advance? Do I know for sure?" Until you can answer that question, you've not identified the core-value you provide.

Tie Products to Core-Value

Remember, customers and clients are not paying for your product or service. They are paying to further a value that is dear to them.

Whenever possible, tie your products and services to your customer's core values. A product identified with core values is worth more to your customer than one that only serves secondary values. The more you help customers and clients succeed in the realm of their core values, the greater the core-value you provide.

Core-Value and Non-Profits

Like their profit-making cousins, non-profits must also focus on core-value. For them, however, the task is a bit more daunting, for they have two entirely different sets of customers. One group consists of "clients," people who make use of the non-profit's services. The other group are the "donors."

Non-profits do not typically think of contributors as customers. But they should. Like customers in the traditional sense, donors are "spending" money to advance something they cherish or value. Non-profits succeed by creating a core-value that resonates with their donors' core values.

Non-profits are sometimes naïve about donor motivation. They simply assume that contributors give to the same ideals and goals that motivate the people who head the non-profit. But as the old saying goes, that "ain't necessarily so." Donors contribute for a host of reasons, all of them tied to personal value systems.

As non-profits diversify their range of services, they attract donors with a correspondingly diverse set of motivations for giving. It becomes more challenging to know what motivates the support of specific contributors. More than once I've seen non-profit leadership discontinue a program or service, considering it of only secondary import, only to learn that it was the primary reason that many of their donors supported them.

Here then is the “golden rule” (the rule that brings in the gold): Before you ask for support, know the core-value you provide for your donors. If you can’t name that core-value right now, take time to find out what it is — and soon. Donors always give to what *they* think is important, not what you happen to value.

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