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"Vision Should Start With The Customer"

This, according to Arthur C. Martinez, chairman and CEO of Sears Roebuck and Co., who was speaking at a quality conference last Fall. "The customer," he said, "should be the focus of all major activities starting with the development of a company's vision.

"I've read at least 150 vision statements from every part of the country. Most of them read like a United Nations charter: 'we're going to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and achieve world peace.' But they didn't organize around the principle of the customer. They worked backward from the customer, trying to integrate everything that the companies did.

"When Sears developed its vision, the senior managers asked: 'what is it that we, as an enterprise, want to be known for?' They came up with three simple concepts around which Sears now galvanizes and moves the company forward. Sears wants to be a:

1. Compelling place to shop
2. Compelling place to work
3. Compelling place to invest

"The most important element in this vision is that it starts with the customer."

Company's Vision & Goals Must Be Articulated

Speaking at a quality conference last Fall, Kevin J. Jenkins, president and CEO of Canadian Airlines International Limited, shared his views on creating and articulating a vision and plan:

"Once an organization creates a vision," he said, "the work is only half done. A vision held only by its leadership is not enough to create any real change. To ensure success, management must continuously -- and creatively -- articulate the company's vision and goals.

"This is achieved through open communication systems that encourage employee feedback and facilitate a two-way flow of information. Because the company's ultimate goal must be to satisfy the customer, it is imperative that employees understand what is expected of them as well as their responsibility for achieving results.

An effective communications strategy does not merely rely on memos, magazines, or E-Mail. In fact, surveys show that our employees' preferred source of information is directly from their supervisor. This involves a commitment at every level of the organization to open two-way communication"

Measure Customer Satisfaction

To deliver good customer service, companies need to do research to understand what factors drive customer loyalty and what their customers value. To obtain this information, there are three things a company should measure:

- customer satisfaction;
- why customers left your company; and
- the attrition rate of customers.

You can't have customer loyalty without knowing what these measures are.

Measurement tools, such as surveys, interviews, observations, and focus groups, need to be matched with company objectives. If a company wants qualitative data, such as what is important to customers, it should use a personal approach, such as focus groups and interviews. If a company wants to obtain quantitative data, such as finding out what a large number of people think of the company, then written surveys should be used.

It is important to remember that what people say and what they do are often different. For example, an individual might be delighted with the taste of the extra raisins and nuts offered in a high-priced, well-advertised cereal but will still end up buying the generic brand.

Companies, therefore, need to ask the right questions to understand why customers make purchase decisions and what is needed to delight them. A trained interviewer can help to define the specific needs customers have and what it will take for them to buy your product or service.