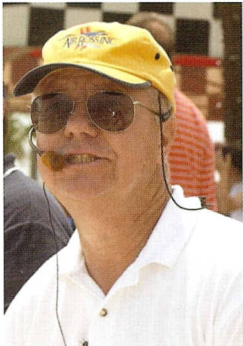


Asking for Complaints



In May's column, I discussed my reaction to an airshow critic and how I had used customer complaints in a previous life. Allow me to continue that theme this month. If this column sounds like a business magazine, it is – the business of airshows.

A problem facing all airshows is increasing the customer base. (In this article "customer" refers to both spectators and event sponsors.) Any business increases its customer base by tenaciously retaining

current customers and aggressively attracting new ones.

I expect many *World Airshow News* readers also subscribe to *The Harvard Business Review* but, in case you missed it, I'd like to point out an article published in December of 2003 by Frederick F. Reichheld entitled, "The One Number You Need to Grow."

To quote Mr. Reichheld: "If growth is what you are after, you don't need complex customer surveys; you simply need to know what your customer is saying about you."

Frederick Reichheld is one of this country's leading experts on customer loyalty and retention. In his article, he states that the most important measurement of customer satisfaction is whether or not your current customer will recommend your business to a friend or colleague. Will that person put his or her credibility on the line to help you promote your airshow?

Our industry has spent considerable energy researching our "spectator base." Our national trade organization has a detailed demographic profile of the people attending an airshow. This profile should make a large corporate sponsor salivate at the prospects of tapping into that market, yet no one is beating a path to our door carrying the much-needed sponsorship dollars.

This conundrum is complex, but over the last few weeks, I have spent many hours in introspective review of my part of this puzzle. What I found disturbs me.

I have almost 40 years experience as an airshow participant, but I've been going to airshows so long that I have forgotten what it is like to be a mere spectator – merely the most important person at the show – the customer.

I have forgotten what it is like to put up with the frustrations of traffic, parking, standing in line for the port-a-potty, dealing with inflated prices and deflated children, no place to sit, or no shade to be found. I've been on the "inside" so long I have forgotten what it is like to be on the "outside."

I wonder how many of our airshow customers would recommend the show to friends and colleagues? Does the Monday morning water cooler conversation go something like this?

Bill: "How was the airshow?"

Fred: "Well, it was alright but ..."

Not the glowing "word of mouth" advertising necessary for growth.

Mr. Reichheld's customer satisfaction question is simple. "On a scale of zero to ten, with ten meaning 'extremely likely' and zero meaning 'not at all, how likely would you be to recommend a company's product or service (airshows) to a friend or colleague?" In Reichheld's terminology, "Promoters" rate the operation a nine or 10. "Detractors" rate it a zero to six.

Subtract the percentage Detractors from the percentage of Promoters and you have the Net-Promoter Score.

Companies like eBay and Amazon.com received scores of 75 to 80 percent. The median score across 400 U.S. companies in 28 industries surveyed by the *Harvard Business Review* was 16 percent. I fear our industry would rate below this already low score.

With all that's involved in producing an airshow, it's all too easy to treat our customers as a hindrance. We get focused on rules like "No Smoking" yet we don't offer a clearly marked smoking area. We ask them to help keep the trash picked-up, yet don't have enough trash cans and the ones we have are full. We fail to envision our event from the perspective of the customer, and we are not customer friendly.

This is not meant as an indictment of any event, just that there is so much involved in the production process that the customer gets lost. Perhaps we should follow the Disney model and have a top-tier management person in charge of "Guest Relations."

I know of very few shows that conduct formal exit surveys of their customers, and I've never seen a Net-Promoter Score mentioned in any industry communication.

From my perspective, the airshow industry is in a period of negative growth. We are losing venues due to urban encroachment and political pressures. Several shows have failed due to economics. This trend must be reversed.

Airshows are put on by people who like airshows. Those of us on the "inside" do wear rose-colored glasses and our friends and colleagues are usually too polite to give us honest opinions beyond the fact they were too busy to attend the show (a telling statement in itself).

We need to ask for complaints. We need to listen to our Detractors. We need to grow our business by responding to what our customers want, not just what *we* enjoy.