

We act as if we want customers to behave like rocks -- to go just where we throw them. But they usually behave more like birds, flapping off to where they want to go.



Why customer experience management is more like bird tossing than rock throwing

By Susan Abbott

Richard Dawkins, noted biologist and author, is credited with originating the metaphor of bird tossing versus rock throwing. It's very apt for thinking about customer experience.

Rocks can be aimed at a target, and if we practice throwing them, we will eventually be able to hit the target with considerable success. The variables in rock throwing are relatively few. And the rock cannot really be said to have an agenda of its own.

It sometimes seems that we want to aim customers in just this way. But customers are more like birds. We can toss a bird into the air, and it may or may not go in the direction of our target. A bird is an individual. A bird's behavior may be predictable, but is never as predictable as a rock's.

If we want to aim birds at targets, it helps to use enticements that are inherently of interest to the bird -- like just the right kind of birdseed. Having a birdbath helps, but it must be in just the right place, or the birds won't use it.

Customers are very much like birds, and very little like rocks. So are employees. The number of variables at work in their behavior is enormous, and simple models are unlikely to give us the results we seek.

If you want rocks in your garden, you simply order a truckload of them. But if you want birds, you must be a careful gardener, observing the local birds and their behavior, trying various combinations of plants and fountains. Being a good student of bird behavior is much more useful than putting up signage telling the birds where to land. Shifting your birdbath a few feet away from a big tree can make a huge difference.

If you hear someone say they want to train their customers in order to change their behavior, they are operating from a rock-throwing mentality. It may have some success, but never as much as developing a deep understanding of where customers are trying to fly to already.

We are expert bird -- er, customer -- watchers. Call us to discuss how to gather and leverage insights into your customers to improve your results.

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