

How To Excite À La Carte Customers

By David J. Gardner

Customers expect companies to offer more than a “one-size-fits-all” product or service. The à la carte customer™ wants to be in control of what they buy. A prospective customer wants to know what is available, at what price and, if we’re talking about a manufactured product, how long it will take to produce.

Traditionally, companies with configurable products and services build and maintain elaborate, electronic menus—often referred to as “configurators”—that describe the array of options available. Many companies offer so many choices that prospective customers are overwhelmed leaving them to wonder, “Where do I start? How do I begin to understand what product or service is appropriate for me?” For example, Dell’s website, dell.com, offers a vast array of choices yet does not go far enough in helping a prospective customer converge on the best solution based on their individualized needs.

Most companies discuss their products and services using industry-centric language which may align poorly with the language and expertise of the prospective customer. If a prospective customer doesn’t understand a company’s lingo, there’s going to be problems. Here’s an example.

Imagine you have just arrived in Malaysia and you are taken to a local, traditional buffet. You know nothing about the food you see. Some things look like insects, some things look raw—you are going to have many questions. There will be language differences that make it difficult to communicate with your local host. There will be a lot of “yesses” and head nodding but you wonder, “Did she really understand that I can’t tolerate anything spicy? When she tells me it’s not spicy, can I trust she understands my definition of ‘spicy?’” It is no different speaking to a prospective customer who does not possess expertise about your products and services.

If a company does a poor job of helping prospective customers make appropriate choices through its selling tools, it forces the prospective customer to speak with someone to help them figure out what to buy or, worse, turns the prospective customer toward competitors who more effectively help an individual decide what they need to buy.

Sometimes, a prospective customer will connect with a knowledgeable sales agent and, at other times, the customer will speak to a sales agent who knows little more about the company’s offerings than the prospective customer. The prospective customer has no means to determine the skill and expertise of the sales agent taking their call. If the product or service doesn’t meet the customer’s expectations, the customer may never buy from that company again. The unhappy customer is likely to share their negative experience with others.

Most configurators fail to offer what prospective customers really need. What are the best practices that companies of configurable products and services must employ in next-generation configurators?

- The configurator needs to be assistive to the prospective customer and the sales agent. Prospective customers require more than a “product selector” or “service selector” as traditional configurator solutions are presently constituted. Prospective customers need much more than an elaborate menu presented with little guidance about how to order or configure a product or service tailored to their individualized needs. Consider the trusted advisor role a waiter satisfies in a high-end restaurant—the waiter provides guidance and expertise to help the customer order a wonderful meal from a myriad of possibilities.
- Configurable product and service providers must offer guided selling solutions that teach a prospective customer how to buy based on the essential mission or application required of the product or service. To do this requires matching customer-required attributes with attributes inherent in certain products and features.

- Prospective customers need to know they are selecting the appropriate product or service based on attributes they have previously been prompted to provide. It is far better to fit the solution to the customer's actual needs than let them buy something based purely on price that will disappoint them later.
- Configurable product and service providers need to provide different entry paths to help a prospective customer converge on a solution—the tools must help the novice or infrequent purchaser as well as the expert.
- Prospective customers need to have the opportunity to learn about products and services they never dreamt existed, creating excitement and engagement.

Has any company created what I call the "next-generation configurator?" Not that I am aware of. Most companies that have implemented configurators have done what I call Version 1.0 but need to be thinking about Version 2.0. Version 2.0 offers companies an opportunity to distance themselves from the competition.

These best practices for offering and presenting configurable products and services via next-generation configurators will turn customers into committed, raving fans. That's exciting!

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