

Ping Putter: Understanding Customer Needs

Description

Before he ever swung a golf club in his life, Karsten Solheim had already made a profound impact on the lives of millions of Americans. As an engineer employed at General Electric in Ithaca, New York, in the 1950s, Solheim had an idea for a new kind of television antenna that would be affixed directly to the top of the television. GE wasn't interested in the concept, so Solheim gave it to friends of his who worked at an electronics company in Chicago. The concept caught on, and when the electronics company sold its millionth set of rabbit-ear antennae, Solheim received a gold-plated set in recognition of his contribution.

His contributions to the game of golf would result in even greater riches and recognition. When he first took up the sport, he was like many novice hackers; he found the game alluring, but he wasn't very good. As he spent more time on the golf course, his game improved, but he found his play around the greens particularly irksome. Try as he might, he couldn't develop consistency in his putting stroke.

Like many golfers, he blamed his putter for this lack of control. Unlike the great majority of golfers, though, his engineering background afforded him the opportunity to correct such a problem. Solheim's engineering knowledge led him to question the design of the standard putter of that era. A typical putter at that time, designed more for aesthetics than for performance, consisted of a steel shaft running down into a slab of metal which was uniformly thick from heel to toe. Solheim knew from experience that the design was inherently unstable and would naturally cause the clubface to twist when it struck the ball.

Solheim decided to experiment with new designs. He took a rectangular aluminum bar and added lead weights behind the heel and the toe. The shaft was then fused near the center of the aluminum bar. This perimeter-weighted design created a large sweet spot in the middle of the clubface, offering much greater stability when the putter struck the ball. Solheim found that the new putter offered him much greater consistency on the putting greens, so he put the putter in his bag.

GE transferred Solheim shortly thereafter to Palo Alto, California, where a club pro soon noticed Solheim's touch around the greens. When Solheim let the pro use his newly designed putter, the pro was impressed enough to suggest that Solheim market the club. Solheim was soon back at the drawing board, refining his original design. He added an aluminum plate at the back (so left-handers could use the club) as well as a bar of metal at the bottom to which to attach the shaft, and took the design to a welder to produce the prototype.

When Solheim tried out the new putter, the ball rolled straight and true. On top of that, the club's design and composition produced a clear ringing sound when it struck the ball—a ping. Solheim had created both a putter and a name in one stroke.

Though the golf industry was quite wary of such radical club redesigns, Solheim slowly gained a market for his new putter. When Julius Boros won the 1967 Phoenix Open using the Ping putter, sales took off. Jack Nicklaus began using the club and requested the right to distribute the putter in England. Gary Player asked for distribution rights in South Africa. Karsten Manufacturing was on its way to becoming the dominant club manufacturer in the golf industry.

Solheim later expanded his line to include irons, creating the perimeter-weighted, cavity-backed design that has become all the rage among manufacturers and golfers alike. Solheim's design legacy remains intact, and while the company dropped to second place in iron sales in 1995 (the first year since 1983 that Pings were not the best-selling iron in the game), Karsten Manufacturing remains a major force in the golf

industry. Likewise, Solheim is still doing quite well for himself; a recent *Forbes* survey included him on its list of the 400 richest people in America. His original Ping putter turned out to be a stroke of good fortune indeed.

Learning Points

There is no surer way of discovering customer needs than through the technique of “being a customer.” For Karsten Solheim, it was only natural that he act as a customer, since he was a customer during his initial design phases. Still, the theory can be applied to any organization. In small companies, it is quite easy to have every employee involved in all aspects of the business and working closely with the customer, so that understanding customer needs comes naturally. In larger companies, especially in the service industry, new employees may be required to work successively in various departments, learning all aspects of the business and becoming familiar with the needs of the customers.

- In hotel chains, this means working in the dining room, housekeeping, finance, reception, and so forth.
- In some manufacturing companies, the product designers undergo training which gives them wide exposure to various production stations so that they make the kinds of products they will be designing. In retail stores, the designers sell the product; in service shops, they repair the product.

Discussion Questions

Question: How can your organization make use of the concept of being your own customer?

Answer: Look for opportunities to shop your own organization. If you produce a consumer product, buy, use, and evaluate the product. If you provide a service, seek out and use the service.

Question: If your product or service is not offered to the general public, how might you best replicate the “be a customer” approach?

Answer: Responses will vary. Many organizations produce goods or provide services that are inputs to other products or processes or are just not publicly sold. If this is the case, try to find an analogous product or service that you can experience to extract some information. Then translate your experience to your organization’s product.

Question: What is the benefit of being a customer?

Answer: Being a customer helps bring you as close as possible to being in the customer’s shoes. It helps maintain customer focus and reminds employees that their work is a means to an end—that end being satisfied customers. It also provides firsthand knowledge on what works and what doesn’t. The experience of being a customer needs to be done on a regular basis, since customer needs change constantly.

Question: What are some examples of ways to be a customer?

Answer: A partial list of examples follows.

- If you work in a bank, open a bank account there.
- If you provide medical services, be a patient at one of your facilities.
- If you manufacture household tools, buy and use some tools at home.
- If you work in a training department, be a participant in one of your courses.
- If you make consumer goods, buy and use one or more of your products.

Question: What is unique about the Ping putter example? How can you apply it?

Answer: Karsten Solheim's interest in designing putters came about because he was a golfer looking to improve his putting. Think of ways you can encourage your employees to be a customer of your product or service. If you provide dental services, how about a complimentary annual check-up? If you manufacture snack foods, how about distributing samples to employees?