

Only One Master: Customer or Process

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Can an organization serve more than one master? For the past century the manufacturing community has been trying to serve multiple masters, but not being very successful at it. Manufacturers feel they have to serve the customer but they invest all of their time and resources into their manufacturing technologies.

They buy new equipment and software, hire new people, and constantly focus on driving the efficiencies of their manufacturing capabilities. The desire to make manufacturing better seems to outweigh the ability to serve the customer sufficiently.

The good news is that the world reaps the benefits of the most advanced, most efficient manufacturing in the history of mankind. This efficiency increases the output of a factory while lowering the costs. It also helps entire industries maintain their output capacity for their market without the scalability challenges of human resources.

The U.S. continues to increase the manufacturing output even though there are reports about how manufacturing jobs are declining. Perhaps measuring the output by the number of workers is an antiquated approach, which can be seen on YouTube where videos of factories that operate with almost no humans can be found.

Who has paid the price, though not always financially, of these technological implementations and increased efficiencies? It's the customer who, for decades has suffered with their manufacturing partner being focused on the process and not on them.

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The customer wants to think they are more important than the process, and the manufacturer wants to believe they are decent business people, but you can look at the behaviors of the manufacturers and the experiences of their customers to determine the reality.

If you have dealt with a manufacturer for any duration, then you have had a customer experience that may have gotten you what you needed, but was not similar to something you have experienced from a consumer-focused company of the likes of Nordstrom's.

You may actually feel that you are bothering the manufacturer with your requirements of speaking to a human, wanting an accurate quote, wanting an update on your late shipment, etc. It may seem as a burden to them and come across as such.

The reality is: The customer is manufacturers' paycheck, which is quickly forgotten when the new machine arrives, or the process needs to be improved, or they want a larger factory.

Of course it's not the manufacturer's fault. Being a manufacturer today is very tough and demanding. We work in a truly global market where the company in Indiana is competing head-to-head with the company in Shenzhen. The ability to communicate and share pricing information is near instant and the access to information is overwhelming.

The design of products is also more difficult with the evolution of CAD and materials. Manufacturers today are not just making simple boxes, but complex, organic parts. However, not providing the attention to customers they deserve is not a good business practice. Manufacturers should invest the same energy they put in their manufacturing process into their customer management process.

Interestingly, we have a real-world experience of the phenomenon described above. Quickparts has always been focused on the customer, and started the business with technology designed to make it easy for customers to buy parts. Quickparts only had the customer to serve, so they were the one and only master.

By focusing on the customer, loyal fans were developed and Quickparts was able to maintain a Net Promoter Score at the same levels of non-manufacturing focused companies, such as Amazon and GE. They were also able to implement powerful strategies that enhanced their communication with the customer.

One of my favorites is the HMD program, which stands for "how's my driving" taken from the stickers on the back of delivery trucks. Quickparts wanted their customers to be able to easily send an email that offered feedback on how the company was doing. Emails went directly to the entire executive team. Most responses were very positive accolades for the team, while some were complaints in which the customer got an immediate call and resolution.

The point is, if manufacturers are focused on the customer, it's not hard to find

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ways to make it easier for the customer. If manufacturers are focused on other parts of their business, then the customer will always be down the list and these easy strategies become impossible implementations.

Manufacturers need to be aware of their challenges and what master they choose to serve. Perhaps they should intentionally break their company into divisions that allow the master to be determined by the purpose of the division instead of sacrificing the entire company by serving the wrong master.

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