

Choose Best Practices Over Common Ones

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As we learned from our mothers, doing something simply because everyone is doing it doesn't make it smart or good. But often, what's touted as best practices are often instead simply what a preponderance of companies are doing.

Benchmarking is an important idea. The concept is to find organizations that are doing something extremely well, and then measure or benchmark your practices against theirs. But many public benchmarking studies today rely heavily on whomever responds to the survey or questionnaire, regardless of how likely they are to be employing best practices. So often the results of the benchmarking out there are common practices, not necessarily best practices.

Here's an example we can all relate to: if you call ten voice response systems and make a selection that isn't valid, you'll likely hear error messages that use the term "invalid entry." Does that mean it's a best practice? Absolutely not. Best practice error messages never blame the caller or make you feel stupid.

That's not to say that these kinds of benchmarking studies can't be valuable. They help us understand the competition, gain insight into what's going on outside of our own world, and find ways in which we can gain an edge. They may even allow us to find darn good practices that we can adapt to our businesses. But what you get from such surveys are not necessarily best practices.

Finding the best and leaving the rest

So how do we get to best practices? A best practice is something that is customer centric and results in high levels of customer satisfaction. If you're looking for customer service best practices, you should absolutely look at published benchmarking studies to understand the range of practices that others use.

Then take that knowledge and do your own research. Educate yourself on what's going on in your industry, but look to organizations that are leaders in customer service outside your industry as well. Understand the criteria for customer service success in your business and identify others who meet – or exceed – your criteria for success. What are they doing differently that you can adapt and use? Especially if companies are outside of your industry, they are often happy to share their success stories.

But don't always assume that the practices of early adopters or leading-edge companies are best practices – or that the best practices you identify elsewhere will work in your business. Clearly lay out your own gap analysis, critical success factors, benefits and

risks before you make any changes. And understand how changes fit in your overall corporate culture, corporate mission, and your customer experience. In the best cases, you'll end up with pretty darn good practices that help your company meet its goals effectively and efficiently.

Finally, remember that best practices are not static. They change as companies develop new products and services, as technology changes, and as customers' experience and sophistication evolve.

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