

What Is Your Value-add-itude?

A few years ago, Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote about a phenomenon called selfing, "... that inevitable and incorrigible tendency to construct out of almost everything and every situation an I, me, and mine, and then to operate in the world from that limited perspective ..." Everyone knows someone who processes every moment of reality through that limited-view prism called self. To that person, the world spins on his or her personal axis.

The latest phenomenon in the world of narcissism is called the "selfy." This is the arms-length photograph people take of themselves to share with others in social media. The most famous of these is the three-way selfy taken by President Barack Obama, Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, and British Prime Minister David Cameron at the Nelson Mandela Memorial Service. Bad taste, fun, or harmless? You choose.

From which direction does your definition of value flow—from you to the customer or from the customer to you? This is another way of saying: Through which lens do you view what you sell—your lens or the customer's lens? Do you see your product or services as value-added or value-received?

If you are customer-focused, you ask, "Why can't we sell what they want to buy?" If you are seller-focused, you ask, "Why can't they buy what we want to sell them?" If you are seller-focused, you say, "They're not buying what we're selling." If you are customer-focused, you say, "That's because we're not selling what they're buying."

Henry Ford is credited with saying, "You can have any color car you want as long as it is black." That is seller-focused thinking. He is also attributed to saying, "If I had asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse." Hence, we face the innovator's dilemma. Who knows what is best, you or the customer? Even the legendary Steve Jobs faced this dilemma, "It's really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them." Innovating from the customer's perspective is customer-focused. Innovating because you like it is seller-focused. The relevant question is, "For whom are we doing this, us or the customer?" If you define value in customer terms, they reward your efforts by paying your price. Conversely, if you define value in your terms, you pay for it with a higher discount.

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