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Customer Assassins and Angels: Understanding Customer Profiles Across Industry Sectors Using Maritz Research's CEBenchmarks Study

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My grandfather was the customer you wanted to fire. He would routinely go to his local hardware or electronics store and harass the staff, purchase a product, and then return it making full use of the “no questions asked” return policy these establishments disastrously honored. Not only did he absorb everyone’s time at the retail outlets he frequented, he was indiscriminately critical of any retail experience he had. Surviving some frugal times; some would call him thrifty, others would call him cheap, but retailers would call him trouble.

Are there customers out there who are just impossible to satisfy? Those who consistently evaluate products and services unfavorably could simply represent a form of response style. Alternatively, those who consistently evaluate products and services low across categories could also represent a type of consumer. My Maritz Research colleagues and I call these customers “Customer Experience Assassins.”

Likewise, we all know those, let’s call them “Customer Experience Angels,” who float through life blissfully unaware of the poor service and products they endure. They don’t grumble about cold soup or the unkempt hotel room. They don’t return things or complain much at all, and they are generally happy people.

You probably know an Assassin or an Angel in your own lives. But who are they and what, if anything, can we do about them?

It’s critical to understand both who Customer Experience Assassins and Angels are for a number of reasons. First, knowing what proportion of your customer base is an Angel or an Assassin is important for understanding how to interpret your customer experience measurement. Second, knowing a little about the characteristics of these people helps you develop products and service experiences that please people who can be pleased. Every customer base has some proportion of angel- and assassin-like customers. This doesn’t mean you can never do anything right for Assassins or wrong for Angels. However, catering to these customers to the exclusion of others is a bit fruitless.

To answer these questions we turned to the Maritz Research CEBenchmarks study.

How we did it

Maritz Research’s CEBenchmarks study tracks 34 on-going experiences in 16 different industries among 263 different brands. We interview approximately 3,300 consumers per month who evaluate 1-5 brands yielding approximately 8,700 individual brand evaluations a month. The data in this analysis includes evaluations from January through June of 2011 with over 14,000 respondents.

As a world leader in Customer Experience Measurement (CEM), Maritz Research has made an investment in understanding the Customer Experience across many industries. We wanted to investigate Assassins and Angels with the Benchmark information so we could pin down who they might be. In the survey, respondents can evaluate up to five separate brands on a 10-point scale from “Extremely Dissatisfied” to “Extremely Satisfied” on several dimensions regarding a recent customer service experience.

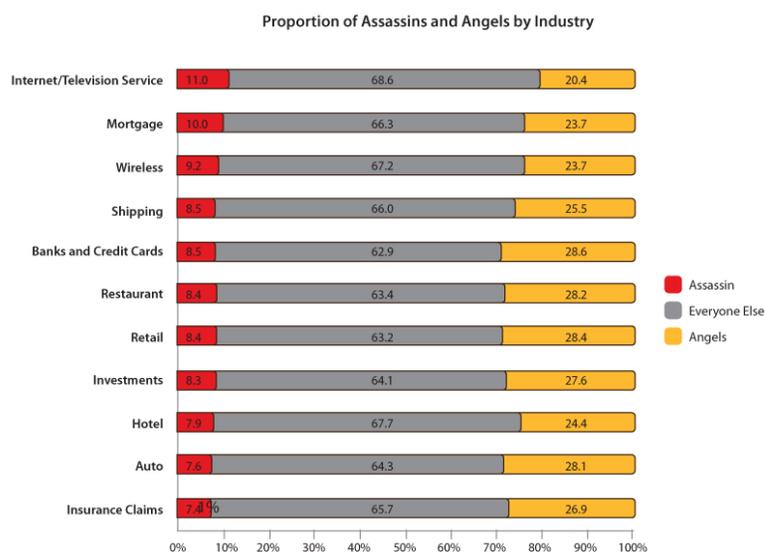


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For the Assassins, we identified people who consistently rated their overall experience across two or more categories as low (below a 6 on a 10 point scale on all categories evaluated, mean=4.7). For the Angels, we identified those who consistently rated their overall experience across two or more categories as high (a 10 on a 10 point scale across all categories evaluated). This yielded 523 Assassins and 1,877 Angels for analysis.

Where do the Assassins lurk?

The first step we took was to look at which industries have more consistently dissatisfied and, conversely, satisfied customers. We can see that, mortgage companies, the Internet/television industries, wireless service providers, and shipping services have a higher proportion of Assassins than others. Specifically, Assassins are most often associated with the activities of getting new Internet or TV service, or those who are closing on a new or refinanced mortgage.



Customer Experience Assassins are predominant in the Internet, cable, wireless and mortgage industries, and Angels grace the investment and insurance industries, but who are these people?

Why is that? Well, customers in general are more likely to evaluate Internet/TV, wireless, and mortgage significantly lower with overall scores (7.4, 7.6 and 7.6 respectively) on a 10-point scale. Typically, these interactions (especially more recently with mortgage companies) tend to be about “bad news” or difficulty initiating services. For some, an appraisal that comes back way below what the client expected or not getting the financing they could have gotten three years ago can be very distressing. Setting up a new cable, Internet, or wireless account or dealing with an outage in service can also be a trying experience. These interactions may put a “dampener” on other interactions as well. Conversely, people tend to rate interactions with investment services and insurance claims much more favorably (8.4 and 8.3 respectively) on average.

Who are the Assassins and Angels?

Ok, so Customer Experience Assassins are predominant in the Internet, cable, wireless and mortgage industries, and Angels grace the investment and insurance industries, but who are these people? How do they differ? We profiled Assassins and Angels with the data collected and here's what we found; Assassins tend to be young, educated, single, more often male,

and ethnically diverse. They are likely to be early in their careers and personal lives and getting established and settled in both. Having limited credit history they expect much and are often disappointed. Also, about one-fifth of them have moved in the last year. That is an opportunity ripe with service failures and botched recoveries.

Customer Experience Angels tend to be older, married, more established, but less educated than the rest of the population. More than a quarter of them are retired. These are people who have established long-term relationships with retailers and service providers. Moreover, they have weathered a long and varied storm of past purchase experiences. This provides context for their more recent ones and motivates them to overlook some minor service delivery issues.

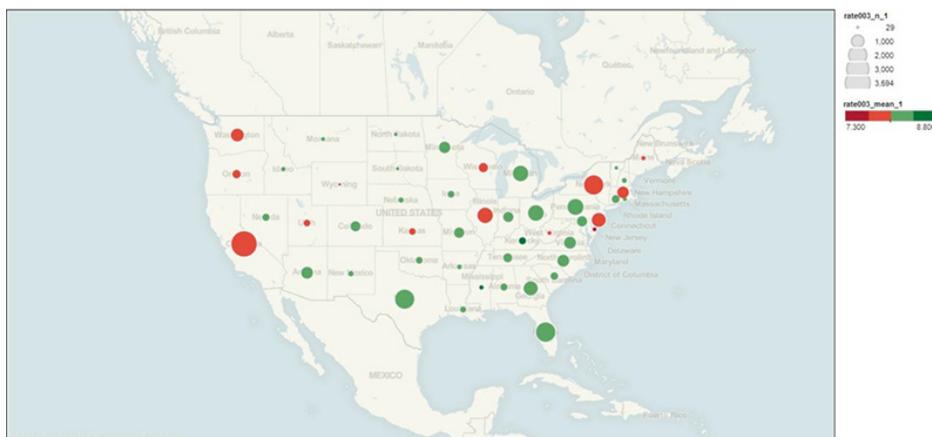
	Assassins	Angels	Everyone Else
Age			
% Under 25	14%	9%	11%
% Under 35	39%	23%	29%
% 55 +	17%	44%	30%
Gender			
% Male	57%	45%	50%
Residency			
% Own their home	68%	76%	75%
% < 1 year at residence	22%	11%	13%
Education			
% Bachelor Degree +	57%	49%	59%
House Income			
% Income < \$50k	35%	36%	32%
% Income < \$100k	20%	23%	27%
Working Status			
% Retired	7%	27%	17%
Marital Status			
% Single, never married	30%	21%	24%
Race/Ethnicity			
% Non-white	30%	19%	21%
% Latino	7%	7%	7%



Academic literature has noted that people who live in cities are systematically different than those who live in non-metro areas; but is there more to it?

Where do they live?

We have asked ourselves for a long time whether geographic differences exist when it comes to customer experience evaluations. Perhaps some people are just unhappier in some locations. Academic literature has noted that people who live in cities are systematically different than those who live in non-metro areas; but is there more to it? We assessed the distribution of overall evaluation scores across the nation in the hopes of finding where our Customer Experience Assassins are more likely to live. Here's what we found.



The scale runs from dark red to light green with red representing a more negative overall experience and green being more positive one. Likewise, the larger the bubble, the more transactions that occurred in that area during our measurement period. Typically people living on the West coast and in lower New England and New York tend to be harsher critics of their retail experiences, whereas those in the Midwest and South tend to be easier graders. This essentially replicates what Maritz Research found in its automotive research a few years ago¹. Why? Well, one explanation can be that there are more concentrated areas where people live in the West and New England, meaning the people who live in dense areas (cities) may be more stressed and tougher graders. Having recently moved from Toledo to Los Angeles, I can attest that the Midwest is much less busy; therefore the additional stress on individual retail channels in population-dense areas may drive a lower evaluation and produce hardened "Assassins" over time.

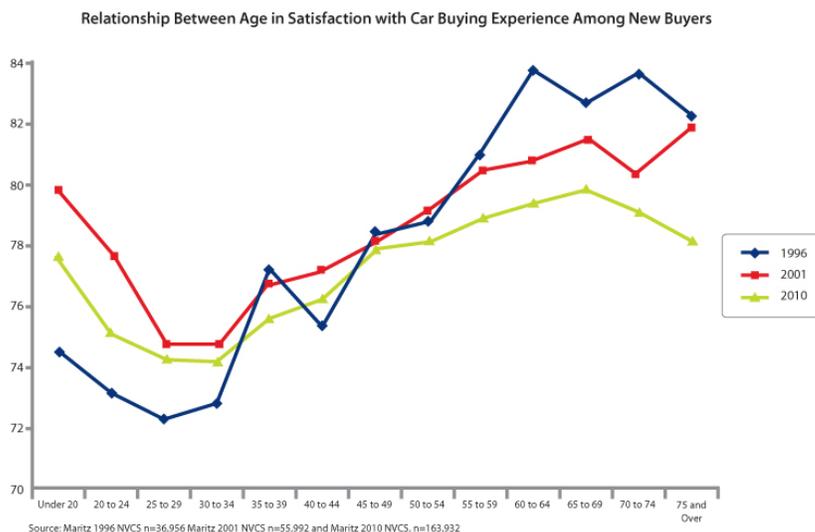
To that end, it is worth noting that the geographic differences in service evaluations we note above could also be driven by the metro-vs. non-metro theorized bias. Note that the three largest cities in the United States, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, are located in "red" states. On the other hand, Houston (the 4th largest and Dallas (9th) and San Antonio (7th) are in the green areas. Future study is needed to determine if these are truly geographic issues or connected with population density and urbanism.



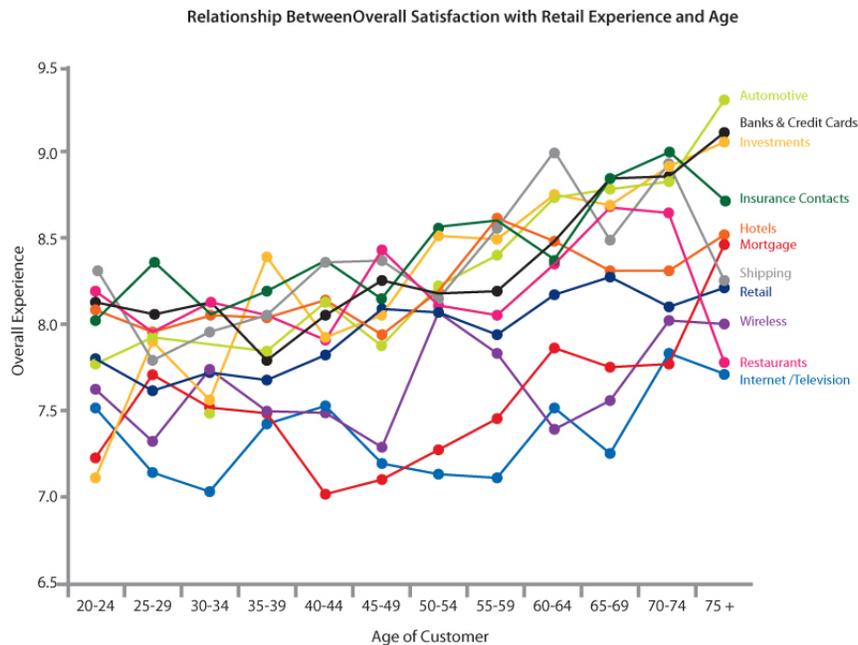
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So, are Assassins always Assassins?

The answer is: probably not. While our benchmarking data is relatively new, we have decades of data in the automotive industry indicating that being an Assassin may be associated with life stage. Maritz Research's New Vehicle Customer Survey (NVCS) measures overall satisfaction of all light duty new vehicle buyers and lessees in the United States and Canada. As you can see, even across a 14-year period, the pattern holds true.



Those early in their career tend to be less favorable about the purchase experience than those who are older. To be a cohort effect we would see a dip move across time. However, that's not the case. We see a consistent dip in satisfaction with the car buying experience in the 20-34 age period which then increases as they grow older. This pattern also holds true in all of the industry categories in the benchmarking study.



What to do about Assassins?

So Customer Experience Assassins and Angels do exist. But what can and should we do about those pesky Assassins? There are practical as well as metric-based considerations. For retailers, restaurateurs, hoteliers and their parent companies, the question is how to manage Assassins. For those in the CEM trade on both the supplier and client sides, the issue is how to deal with Assassins in the context of your Customer Experience Measurement System.

From a metrics strategy perspective, there seems to be a pervasive and perhaps misplaced emphasis placed on retailers to get 100% top box, or the highest scores possible. This is an admirable goal, but sadly results in some very undesirable behavior. Retailers chase scores rather than satisfying customers and demanding actions such as removing "outliers" and reversing surveys that people may have filled out "incorrectly". Given the amount of pressure to hit, what is sometimes just a single number, this is not surprising.

The truth is you are not going to satisfy everyone all the time and one should question even if you should. There is always 1-4% of the population out there who are like my grandfather; you're just not going to please them and you should stop trying. We've all seen the customer who can't be pleased no matter what. Perhaps the best strategy in some cases is to politely and quietly let them go.

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Likewise each unit location, be it an auto dealer, a hotel, bank, or a big box store, has a unique mix of customers and likely a unique proportion of Assassins and Angels. Imagine you own an automobile dealership near a retirement community. Is it fair to compare your CEM scores (and associated rewards) to someone who owns a dealership in a large college town? Given what we've seen about the demographics between Angels and Assassins, probably not. We recommend that when making performance comparisons companies should strive to compare like units whenever possible. An alternative way would be to set goals based on improvement over current scores or comparison to peers.

From a practical standpoint, it's pretty hard and probably ill-advised to toss Assassins out of your store, although the proprietors in my home town finally got around to it with my grandfather. However, there are a few things you CAN do.

First, be aware of Customer Experience Assassins in your data. How many Assassins are in your pool of customers? Can you identify them? If you can, then you may consider dissuading them from frequenting your stores. This will save marketing dollars and time. Some big box retailers have implemented this strategy to great success.

However, there is a difference between dissuading a customer and treating them poorly. The former is a strategy to direct them some place else, and the latter can have disastrous consequences. Someone who doesn't show up has nothing to complain about. A customer receiving poor treatment or being "politely ignored" ten years ago might tell 10 or 20 people. With the advent of social media, the modern day Assassin can tell hundreds of thousands of people instantaneously. Although, if he is constantly complaining, many may not listen; but enough will.

Finally, it is important to look at true Customer Experience Assassins versus those who are there in a temporary state due to life stage. A true Assassin is someone who is not only consistently critical across brands, but is consistently critical of ALL brands over time. Some of those in the "dip period" of 20-34 years of age may turn out to be an Angel later in life. We need to identify the pervasive Assassins vs. the temporary ones. This requires longitudinal study utilizing the benchmarking study in the future.

It's in everyone's best interest to help the customer and strive to provide the best experience possible. However, in some cases, you may be investing good money into a bad customer. This doesn't mean you should aggravate them. It just means letting guys like my grandfather go to the next hardware store down the street to "buy" their Roto-tiller, and trying not to give them a reason to complain about you.

End Notes

¹Pimley, S. (2008). Understanding Seasonal and Regional Differences in Satisfaction. *Maritz Research Forum* Article.



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With the advent of social media, the modern day Assassin can tell hundreds of thousands of people instantaneously.

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