



Psychic Technology for Franchisors: Knowing What Franchisees Don't Know ... Before They Don't Know It

By Dan Martin, CFE

Are you a psychic? Oh, wait, you probably knew I was going to ask that.

In any case, it's safe to say that 100 percent of U.S. franchisors wish they had the elusive "sixth sense" to predict their franchisees' questions and concerns. No, I'm not referring to the ability to "see dead people" or pinpoint Jimmy Hoffa's whereabouts. Rather, I'm talking about how franchisors can be equipped to anticipate franchisees' needs -- before they are even raised, without tarot cards or a magical crystal ball.

It doesn't take a psychic to predict where I'm headed with this. The key to "proactive powers" for franchisors lies in -- surprise -- new advances in technology. With new systems designed specifically for franchise organizations, it's now realistically possible for franchisors to stay 10 steps ahead of their franchisees, particularly in terms of questions they are likely to ask and issues they are probably going to raise.

For example, from the time of their initial opening of their location and beyond, franchisees tend to pose similar questions to their franchisor at certain stages of their franchisee life. I can't tell you how many times franchisors ask me how they can communicate important information to all of their franchisees at once, to avoid being repeatedly inundated with the same questions over and over again.

There's a certain irony to franchisors asking "over and over again" how they can halt repetitive questions from franchisees. So here's the answer, once and for all: Use the technology of your Intranet Platform to be proactive. As an experienced franchisor, you can anticipate questions your franchisees may ask and provide the answers ahead of time. Doing so increases franchisee productivity and saves you the time and stress of answering each question individually. It allows you to reach your entire franchise system in one fell swoop.

Knowledge is Power

Franchisees don't know what they don't know. Does that make any sense? Basically, it means that franchisees have no idea what kind of information they are lacking. Franchisors make themselves available to answer questions 24/7, but franchisees don't avail of the franchisor's offer because they, quite simply, don't know what questions to ask.

With knowledge and experience of previous inquiry patterns, franchisors have the power to "predict" the type of question, the time that it's most likely to come up in the franchisee's life cycle and even have an answer prepared ahead of time. For example, franchisees typically inundate franchisors with multiple, repetitive questions during their build-out process. With advances in technology, franchisors can provide franchisees with status reports on the construction of their storefront that they can access any time of day or night via a Build-out Management CRM or Task Management Platform.

One proactive technology application is a 24/7 help desk that allows franchisors to recognize patterns of commonly asked questions, which can automatically be transferred into an FAQ directory for new and established franchisees to access. This technology offers franchisors a tool to organize their franchisees' questions by frequency, category and franchisor responses. The patterns typically show that certain questions apply to all franchisees, some of which don't even know it yet.

Additional innovative technology tools that franchisors can utilize to be proactive with their franchise systems include:

Mentor Forums

Mentor forums are useful for established, successful franchisees to relay key operational information and specific advice to the entire franchise system. As many franchisors already recognize, franchisees "trust" the advice they receive from peers more so than from the corporate office. A mentor forum offers the perfect way for "veterans" to help out "rookies" in a peer-to-peer feedback format. It's proactive because franchisors don't have to constantly react to franchisees' questions -- they are already being answered by peers.

Vendor Involvement

Message boards monitored by vendors are another practical use of technology to field commonly asked questions directly from franchisees in a centralized forum environment. Vendors can address upcoming issues that only the vendor would be aware of, once again without having to involve the franchisor. This direct form of communication takes the franchisor out of the middle when it comes to franchisee relationships with vendors.

Use of Multiple Mediums

Since all franchisees are different and rely on various types of communication, the proactive approach allows franchisors to issue information summaries via multiple mediums. Mediums such as flash announcements, instant messaging, electronic calendar notifications, text messaging, video and audio streaming are often combined to increase delivery and retention of information at the franchisee level.

From Dusk to Dawn

With many franchise concepts, standard business hours are not the norm. Many franchisees are busy operating their business in the day and burning the midnight oil as well. Having 24/7 access to the technology gives the night owls and early birds the same advantage and access to information as those who are the 9-5 banker's hours type. Franchisees can run their own dashboard reports day or night as a form of proactive self-analysis that can be done without having to turn first to the franchisor.

Access to Archives

Once the technology is put in place, franchisees can check out archived questions and answers in a searchable directory. Franchisees are provided with access to archives to research previously addressed issues without having to ask about them again and the benefit is threefold.

The archives save the franchisee and franchisor time, reduce stress about burning questions, and decreases repetition and redundancy.

Survey Says...

New technology provides franchisees with applications for "self analysis" to help evaluate sales patterns, their bottom line, operational issues and marketing trends. Once again, this type of tool allows franchisees and franchisors to prevent problems before they happen. For example, with the ability to track franchisee sales numbers, a franchisor can easily create benchmarks for best practices in the areas of sales and operations. If a franchisee's numbers don't add up after an in-store audit, or sales are slumping, the franchisor can proactively create goals and standards that apply to the entire franchise system.

Overall, the entire category of "proactive technology" applications keeps franchisors connected with their franchise systems in an unobtrusive way. Likewise, franchisees are truly appreciative when their franchisors are automatically responsive to their needs. Often, franchisees who either fell asleep or didn't pay close attention during training are too shy or embarrassed to ask what they see as "stupid" questions -- not realizing that the majority of their peers are thinking the same thing. The proactive approach via new technology allows franchisees to save face.

By taking advantage of this approach, franchisors can drastically improve their communications with franchisees. By having answers prepared ahead of time to anticipated questions and making them accessible to franchisees at any time, significantly cuts the risks of frustration throughout the franchise organization. By recognizing that a question posed by one franchisee will likely apply to the entire system, a franchisor can communicate important information to everyone in an effective manner -- without having to consult a psychic.

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