

Business Operations Research Project

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Before beginning the 2026-2027 Business Operations Research Events, participants should develop an understanding of this year's topic and how businesses create lasting customer relationships. This introduction provides an overview of the annual challenge and prepares participants to begin researching customer behaviors, analyzing findings and developing strategic recommendations for a local business or organization.

2026-2027 TOPIC

The 2026-2027 topic for each career category is for participants to collaborate with a local business or organization to research what drives customer loyalty and repeat engagement. Using the research findings, participants will develop a strategic plan to strengthen customer retention through loyalty programs, personalized experiences or relationship-building initiatives.

Customer loyalty is developed through positive experiences, trust and consistent engagement over time. Businesses use customer feedback, purchasing behaviors and market trends to better understand what encourages customers to return and recommend their brand to others. Some examples may include:

- **Loyalty Programs:** Point systems, exclusive member rewards, referral incentives or subscription-based memberships that encourage repeat business.
- **Personalized Experiences:** Tailored product recommendations, customized promotions and individualized communication based on customer preferences.
- **Customer Experience Improvements:** Enhancing service quality, streamlining the purchasing process or improving digital and in-store experiences.
- **Relationship-Building Initiatives:** Community events, customer appreciation programs, follow-up communications and social media engagement that strengthen customer relationships.
- **Customer Feedback Strategies:** Collecting and analyzing customer feedback to identify opportunities for improving products, services and the overall customer experience.

The guidelines for each of the Business Operations Research Events are consolidated to facilitate the coordination of participant activities in each of the career categories. This means the guidelines will be exactly the same for each career category. However, each career category will be treated separately as a competitive event.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is customer loyalty, and why is it valuable to businesses?

Think about a business you visit regularly. What keeps you coming back?

Besides loyalty programs, what factors encourage customers to return to a business?

How can businesses measure customer loyalty and repeat engagement?

What information would you want to collect before recommending strategies to improve customer loyalty?

Which industries rely most heavily on repeat customers? Explain your reasoning and provide examples.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Explain the factors that influence customer loyalty and repeat engagement.
- Analyze customer feedback, purchasing behaviors and market trends.
- Identify opportunities to improve customer retention.
- Develop research-based recommendations that strengthen customer relationships.
- Present strategic recommendations that support business decision-making.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Discuss the nature of customer relationship management (CR:016)
- Build and maintain relationships with customers (CR:030)
- Explain the nature of marketing research (IM:010)
- Describe options businesses use to obtain marketing research data (i.e., primary and secondary research) (IM:281)
- Translate research findings into actionable business recommendations (NF:216)

ACTIVITY 1:

Case Study: Building Customer Loyalty



You are to assume the role of customer experience consultant for HARBORVIEW OUTDOORS, a regional retailer specializing in outdoor apparel, footwear and recreational equipment. The chief customer officer (judge) wants you to evaluate the company's current customer loyalty efforts and identify strategies to increase repeat engagement.

Although HARBORVIEW OUTDOORS has experienced steady growth in first-time customers, customer retention has declined over the past two years. Internal data indicates that many customers make a single purchase but do not return, despite positive product reviews and competitive pricing. The company currently offers email promotions and seasonal sales but has never implemented a formal customer loyalty strategy.

Recent customer surveys suggest shoppers value personalized recommendations, exclusive member benefits and meaningful brand experiences. The chief customer officer (judge) has asked you to identify the factors influencing customer loyalty and recommend research-based strategies that will increase repeat engagement and long-term customer retention.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Explain the nature of positive customer relations (CR:003)
- Build and maintain relationships with customers (CR:030)
- Discuss the nature of customer relationship management (CR:016)
- Describe the use of technology in customer relationship management (CR:018)

ACTIVITY 2:

Exploring Customer Loyalty



ACTIVITY QUESTIONS

- Using evidence from the articles, explain the difference between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.
- Why is customer loyalty an important long-term business strategy?
- Describe key steps in developing a customer retention strategy. Where should businesses begin?
- List four customer loyalty strategies utilized by businesses discussed in the articles.
- Identify four measurable outcomes businesses experienced after implementing customer loyalty initiatives.
- Based on your research, what additional recommendations would you make for HARBORVIEW OUTDOORS?
- What questions do you still have about this year's project?

RESOURCES

- [What Is Customer Loyalty? \(Salesforce\)](#)
- [Customer Retention \(SCORE\)](#)
- [Loyalty Programs: Real Examples & Best Practices \(Shopify\)](#)
- [25 Ways To Keep Customers For Life \(AMA\)](#)
- [Customer Loyalty & Retention: 13 Ways to Improve Yours \(HubSpot\)](#)
- [Winning Customer Loyalty: What drives it and what breaks it \(Adobe\)](#)
- [What is Customer Satisfaction? \(ASQ\)](#)

KEY TERMS

- Customer Loyalty
- Customer Retention
- Customer Experience (CX)
- Brand Loyalty
- Customer Satisfaction
- Loyalty Program
- Personalization
- Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)
- Repeat Engagement
- Customer Feedback
- Customer Journey

ACTIVITY 3:

Case Study: Customer Loyalty Trends



Now that you understand the importance of customer loyalty and customer retention, it's time to explore how successful businesses build lasting relationships with their customers. Researching organizations that excel in customer loyalty can provide valuable insight and inspiration as you begin developing recommendations for your own Business Operations Research project. Use the resources provided to investigate current trends and best practices in customer loyalty.

CHANNEL ANALYSIS (3 POINTS)

Choose one real business.

Identify all of the ways the business communicates with its customers. For each communication channel:

- Explain its purpose.
- Describe the type of customer information the business may collect.
- Evaluate how the channel helps build customer loyalty and repeat engagement.

COMPETITOR ANALYSIS (6 POINTS)

Select two businesses that compete within the same industry.

Compare the following:

- Loyalty or rewards programs
- Personalized marketing strategies
- Customer service practices
- Digital engagement
- Overall customer experience

After completing your comparison, identify three best practices that either business could adopt to improve customer loyalty.

CURRENT TRENDS (6 POINTS)

Research three current trends influencing customer loyalty.

For each trend:

- Explain the trend.
- Describe why it is becoming more important.
- Identify one business currently using the trend successfully.
- Predict how the trend may impact customer loyalty over the next five years.

RESOURCES

- [The Ultimate Guide to Customer Loyalty \(Qualtrics\)](#)
- [Customer Retention Strategies That Work \(Shopify\)](#)
- [Personalization and Customer Engagement \(Adobe\)](#)
- [Loyalty is not a discount engine. It is a trust engine \(CXDive\)](#)
- [Why are loyalty programs so important \(TechTarget\)](#)
- [The Loyalty Illusion: Customer Experience Survey \(PWC\)](#)
- [Customer loyalty vs. social media engagement \(Qualtrics\)](#)

What's Next?



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Which customer loyalty strategy impressed you the most? Why?

Which trend do you believe will have the greatest impact on businesses in the future?

Which strategy would you most likely recommend during your Business Operations Research project? Explain your reasoning.

Based on everything you've learned, what research question would you want to answer for your own local business?

NEXT STEPS CHECKLIST

- ☐ Choose a local business
- ☐ Schedule an introductory meeting
- ☐ Develop research questions
- ☐ Conduct primary research
- ☐ Analyze findings
- ☐ Begin strategic recommendations