



DOING BEST WHAT MATTERS MOST TO THE CUSTOMER



Time spent delivering unparalleled customer service is never time wasted

It's official – the most successful organisations are going soft – they're becoming human again! They've remembered, 'just in time' (no pun intended), that ultimately business is about people – it's about human beings, being human.

The key assets of most organisations are not the buildings people work in, or the equipment and machines people operate, nor Intellectual property rights or the Brand Name. No, the key asset of any organisation is its people – and that means its employees and its customers. The two are inextricably linked and you can't have one without the other. If you have de-motivated, cynical, poor performing employees you are likely to have very few happy customers; conversely, if you have loyal employees who are motivated, empowered and well rewarded you will stand a much better chance of having an army of loyal customers who stick by you through thick and thin, recommend you to their family and friends and keep buying your products or service.

Doing best what matters most is the key to creating satisfied customers. Therefore it would seem sensible to get your customers involved right from the start of the recruitment process. What attributes would they like your staff to possess and what sort of service do they expect from them? Once these criteria have been defined, the organisation can recruit the best people for the job, and to me that means those with the best attitude.

“ I CAN IS 100 TIMES MORE IMPORTANT THAN I.Q ”

Of course it is essential that they are then equipped with the right set of skills and the knowledge necessary to do the job brilliantly. It is also prudent to involve all your employees in helping to develop and bring the organisation's philosophy and key values to life. This done, it is crucial that the organisation invests seriously in its 'employees' on-going professional

development so that they have every opportunity to excel in post and reach their full potential. That's got to be a shrewd move all round, not least because it will play a major part in the long term growth and success of the company.

But it doesn't end there. You can't just let them loose and leave them to it - you really need to demonstrate that you value the contribution they make to the organisation.

The Asset Register

I know a General Manager of a Greenfield Distribution site who kept an 'Asset Register' on the coffee table in the large Reception area. In it were the names and job titles of all his colleagues with a paragraph under each one outlining their hobbies and interests, achievements and ambitions. A lump came to my throat the first time I read it and I know it had the same effect on others. How do you think it made his employees feel? Special, valued individuals who felt part of a cohesive team, I bet.



At another site he managed, for Argos, he made an unusual request to his staff. On completion of their three month probation, he asked each of them to paint their hands and then make a handprint on a wall tile. The tiles were then stuck on the wall in Reception. Above the tiles was a plaque, which read: "The hands that built Barton." It was a kind of official welcome aboard and formed part of a celebration hour, sharing first impressions and a bite to eat.

“THE DEEPEST HUMAN NEED IS THE NEED TO BE APPRECIATED”

William James

He'd got it right – he is one of the growing army of leaders who are acutely aware that it's the people who build strong, thriving organisations. Find the right ones, train

and team work goes empowerment. Staff should be actively encouraged, and, crucially, must want to (there's that 'attitude' thing again) deliver exceptional service to the customer - with passion, integrity and sincerity. However, this behaviour should perhaps carry with it a Government Health Warning, as there is no growth without an element of risk. The organisation should allow them enough time to focus on individual needs and empower them to deliver original, personal, memorable service, whilst at the same time realising that all this freedom and initiative will require them, as leaders, to become more flexible, trusting and open. This is the complete antithesis to scripted dialogue that smacks of routine; hierarchical and mind-numbingly bureaucratic systems; and insipid yet rigid corporate policies and procedures that stifle individuality and reduce customers to faceless interruptions to the serious business of making money.

Cost cutting or Customer Satisfaction?

In the last issue of Stakeholder Satisfaction it was reported that two recent studies revealed that cost-cutting strategies, like outsourcing call centres abroad, are alienating many customers. As a result, many brands including NatWest, Direct Line and Nationwide, have started to promote the fact that their call centres are in the UK. They have listened to their customers and realised that saving a few bob at the expense of service just isn't acceptable and doesn't work. We customers know what we want; we have access to far more information than ever before – thanks largely to the internet; we are far more sophisticated and demanding than we were five years ago; and we have more choice. With banks, in particular, it isn't even that important where the branch is any longer because we can carry out the majority of our transactions over the internet or by phone. We can easily vote with

our feet - and we do. But it costs ten times more to get a new customer than it does to keep one, so that spells bad news for businesses with low customer retention. Organisations must retain their existing customer base by earning their respect and loyalty through the service they provide - which is the ultimate differentiator in business today.

As far as employees are concerned organisations must do one more thing. They must ensure that their 'ambassadors' are rewarded handsomely for the job they do. Get the hygiene factors right and the rest follows. In a customer-centric organisation there should also be a bonus scheme in place for outstanding service, based on specific customer feedback; Customer satisfaction should be a permanent item on agendas for Team Briefs and Departmental Meetings and staff should be given the time to 'Make a Difference'. Targets should be aligned with these values and employees should not be penalised for taking 'longer than usual' with some customers. Draconian time and motion performance measures should be assigned to the waste paper basket where they belong; Time spent delivering unparalleled customer service is never time wasted.

Who won the big match?

Rodney, a porter at the Palmar Beach Hotel in Mauritius memorizes all the scores and the names of the scorers in all the Saturday's soccer matches in the UK Premiership. He does the same for the Spanish, Italian, French and German leagues. When guests arrive after an overnight flight, he chats to them as he carries their cases to their rooms. He asks which soccer team they support then gives them the results. They are dazzled! (Taken from 'The Buzz - 50 little things that make a big difference to world class customer service' - by David Freemantle)

them to be the best and provide continuous feedback to demonstrate that you value their contribution and recognise them as an integral part of the organisation's operations - and you are on your way.

Empowerment or Procedures?

Hand in hand with this robust and rewarding culture of learning and development





To see how you are measuring up, take time to be proactive and act like a customer interacting with your company. Perception plays an important part in customer satisfaction so employees should be encouraged to stand in the customers' shoes and see the organisation through their eyes. Once a month front-line employees should 'Be their own Customer' and try their organisation's service on for size. For example, how quickly are phones answered, do they get passed from pillar to post or do staff hold themselves accountable for their actions, are staff reassuring, do they keep their promises and commitments (i.e. get back to you if that is what they have said they would do) and follow up to check that you are satisfied? Do they make you feel valued and were you treated politely and courteously. In a nutshell, were the fundamental principles of customer service adhered to? Your checklist should read:

1. Deliver as agreed
2. Practise good manners
3. Answer calls quickly
4. Deliver confidence
5. Show genuine empathy
6. Minimise wait times
7. Follow-up

During training sessions time should be spent understanding the importance of, and enhancing, communication skills such as rapport building, active listening, interpreting body language, asking the right questions and using an appropriate tone of voice. Workshops should be participative, interactive and FUN!

Dazzling or Diabolical?

Another valuable exercise is to ask your employees to recall a time when they experienced top notch customer service

and a time when they were on the receiving end of appalling service. Ask them to write down the words that describe how they felt on each of those occasions and flag them up on two flipcharts, one entitled 'Dazzling' and the other 'Diabolical'. In groups ask them to think about the knock-on effects of those experiences: to the customer, to the service 'professional', and to the organisation. Their pooled responses will speak volumes. As a result of this, everybody who has customer contact, from the CEO down, should feel inspired to 'search for the hero inside themselves' and make a real difference every day.

“ YOU'LL PREFER OUR COFFEE ”

Recently I walked into a branch of Pret a Manger carrying a Starbucks takeaway coffee. This occurred because none of the sandwiches in Starbucks had whet my appetite and, as luck would have it, just round the corner was a Pret a Manger – I love their BLTs. Armed with a briefcase, a handbag and the coffee I walked in and to my delight spotted a BLT, which I grabbed then walked up to the counter. A little embarrassed, I muttered to the assistant *"I hope you don't mind me coming in here with this"*, nodding in the direction of the cup emblazoned with the name of one of their major rivals, *"but I really fancied one of your BLTs."* To my surprise, he asked *"what is it – Capuccino, Latte . . . ?"* *"Oh, it's a Capuccino."* I replied. *"Sugar?"* He enquired. *"No, just as it comes."* I said *"I tell you what"*, he said,

"I'll give you a Capuccino – on the house - and you can compare the two. I know you'll like ours best!" he added, confidently.

Extremely impressed, if not a little surprised by this spontaneous act of generosity and kindness laced with a 'hint' of fun, I made a note of his name, and his Manager's, and, as I wasn't local asked what street we were on. I told him I'd write to him and let him know my verdict. He'd



made my day, and, incidentally, I did prefer his coffee. Of course that may have had something to do with the fact that the whole experience had been positive and because he had shone his light in my direction and genuinely 'made a difference'. But, from a business perspective, the bottom line was that I would certainly go out of my way to buy coffee from him, and his company, again. And, if we are to believe the statistics, I am bound to tell at least four people about my memorable experience (now I've told you, that figure





will be multiplied by hundreds, if not thousands) and as we all know, word of mouth advertising is the most powerful form of advertising in the world.

I did indeed write and tell him that he had been right about the coffee. I also told him how he'd made me feel. I'm sure that would have brought a smile to his face – it would mine! I wrote another letter to his Manager telling him what great service I'd had, oh, and that I thought this employee should be cloned.

I sincerely hope he didn't get reprimanded for giving me a freebie – If I was his Manager I'd have given him an award! The Manager never acknowledged my letter so I guess I'll never know. But the whole episode left me with a warm feeling inside (just like the coffee!).

Action Plans

Employees should be encouraged to share their own experiences, like the example above, and learn from each other to form a general consensus about what constitutes 'best practice'. They should develop both team and individual action plans for performance improvement which should identify: what they should stop doing, start doing, do differently and do more of. Like a good job description this document should be revisited and updated regularly in response to ever-changing internal and external forces. Likewise, periodical reviews of the organisation's service standards should be undertaken by joint staff and customer work groups so that the organisation is seen by all to be keeping its eye on the ball and continuously striving to differentiate itself from its competitors.

Supplement this with hard data by conducting regular employee and customer surveys to monitor satisfaction levels and identify any trends, good or bad. The results, together with the identified Priorities for Improvement (PFIs) should be fed back quickly and clearly to all concerned and some Quick Wins (Improvements based on survey results and any additional comments) masterminded and actioned. This sends out a strong message to those who have participated - that the company listens, it values their feedback and what's more – it actually does something about it!

“THE GREATEST GIFT WE CAN GIVE TO ANYONE IS THE QUALITY OF OUR ATTENTION”

Albert Camus

In my view, 'Involvement equals commitment' in relation to both employees and customers. Customer focus groups and on-line customer forums are another good way to involve and engage with customers. Treat them as you would like to be treated: invest both your time and energy - listen to them, build relationships with them, respect their opinions, empower them and recognise them as human assets who need to be managed well and loudly applauded, just like your employees. The ROI will be extraordinary.

Customers' hearts and minds

In the USA, the Parcel Delivery and Express Mail Industry is consistently one of the highest ranked in the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) In the

third quarter of 2007 the ACSI was 75.2%, down 0.1% on the previous quarter. Federal Express (84%) and UPS (81%) top the industry rankings but what do they know about delighting the customer that others don't? Claes Fornell, founder of the ACSI and author of 'The Satisfied Customer: Winners and Losers in the battle for Buyer Preference' believes that it is because they both have such strong customer relations. *"They have successfully blended technology with personal service; both companies have sophisticated tracking devices that make it possible to find out exactly where a package may be and both seem devoted to saving their customers' time and trouble. They are also locked in fierce competition without resorting to destructive price wars. Instead, they have engaged in a fight over the best customer service, and that definitely benefits the consumer."*

Are you winning the battle for your customers' hearts and minds? **S**



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