

## WHAT IS CUSTOMER SERVICE?

(Or, are you providing what I want?)

The vagaries of management practices, procedures and fads appear to change according to the wind and tide. Some 2 or 3 years ago senior managers were being advised that the best way to inject new thinking, new strategies and encourage new customers was to recruit new employees from outside the organization. Some 2 decades ago, maybe even longer, the establishment cry was that every company must have a graduate recruitment programme to raise the company profile.

The belief, at the time, was that if an organization was to succeed it had to recruit and retain more people who were 'thinkers' rather than 'do-ers' and that thinking, per se, could only be done by those with higher academic qualifications. Now, many companies have changed tack and have realised that there are people in their own organization who are capable of thinking, managing and doing simply because they have been there some time, they understand the company culture, products and services, and, in many instances, they know and understand company customers because they have worked with them to establish requirements and routines.

During the early 1980's business schools and management consultancies were preaching the gospel according to 'Customer Service'. Indeed, there was a sudden rush to produce internal systems, procedures and video training programmes to teach us all to deal with Customer Service because if we understood the importance of being quick to respond to customer demands it would increase sales and increase company reputation.

Many organizations made visible efforts to be seen to meet customer demands and trumpeted their internal programmes as a way of re-assuring customers. But, in a few short years we all moved onto the next management fad and the concept of customer service, somehow, faded, but perhaps not totally, into the background. Some companies that had previously been held up as role models, in manufacturing but more noticeably in the retail service sector, in the provision of customer satisfaction suddenly embarked upon programmes of downsizing and delayering and broke one side of the triangle - Staff, Systems and Strategy - of meeting customer service.

Some years ago a member of the Institute of Administrative Management posed a question about Customer Service. Apparently, as part on an on-going process of training within their organization, they had been asked to provide a short presentation on the subject of an overview of customer service in the year 2000 in order to get staff in their department thinking along the right lines.

After a little thought I provided the following brief explanation of what I thought the first part of Customer Service should be about – "Manners cost nothing; politeness is a matter of upbringing, attitude and intelligence; and, tolerance is something we should all strive to practice. Providing your customers with what they want, when they want, how they want and at the right time and price are difficult, but it is the baseline of Customer Service.

There are times when customers may be irritable, testing or even downright rude. That is their problem. All you can try to do is disarm them by being patient and listen to their particular problem; do not sink into argument; and, make every effort to be responsive, helpful and polite. And, even though the customer is NOT always right, if she or he insists on choosing a particular item, product or service against your advice then that is their choice. They are the ones purchasing, you are merely meeting their demands."

For the past decade or so many companies have tried to advertise themselves as 'customer-focused' and 'customer-friendly' organizations who are in business not just to make a profit but to meet customer demands. But, far too many appear in UK Plc to have failed. That throws up a number of questions namely; did the company really understand the concept of customer service? Did the company over-price its' products in order to make a fast return? Did it offer the right size, shape, colour, quality and choice of product demanded by customers? Or, more simply, did it remove too many people from the company such that customers were not able to find employees with the right attitude to advise them to find what they wanted, when they wanted it?

Now, would you believe it, customer service is back in vogue. It is based on the somewhat belated belief that without customers a company cannot exist and hinges on the fact that without providing the products and services that people want, and more importantly are prepared to pay for, then you will not retain customers.

So, what is customer service, should we make a big deal out of it and how far must companies go to not only attract but to retain their customers. I pose the question because, for a possible variety of reasons, it seems that customers in Britain, not just in shops but also with utility organizations, local and national government departments and even with some on-line shopping organizations, are, apparently often treated as more a nuisance factor than a valued purchases of their goods and services. I sometimes wonder if it is a fact that many Britons do not like the notion of either "providing or being in service" because of connotations with earlier centuries.

However, to start with, do we, directors, managers and staff, know who are customers are? Do we conduct regular surveys to find out what they, individually, expect of us? For example, in any retail outlet do we invite a customer to complete a simple 30-second questionnaire after they have made their choice and whilst they are paying for it at a till or service point?

How often do we ask whether or not we have met the demands of a customer in terms of quality, size, shape, colour and price? If they leave, having spent some time browsing through the shelves or the stock, without purchasing anything do we ask them did they not find what they wanted in the store? Do we ever ask the question how might we improve our service and what would they like to see in terms of in-store facilities that might just encourage them to return? Or, if people leave without purchasing then what did we not have that they might have wanted?

The key to a lack of, or poor, customer service is, often, complacency by the company and very often by the attitude of employees. Many companies rely entirely on paying for market research conducted by specialist marketing organizations and that is complacency in itself. If you are complacent your customers will know and if they believe you are complacent they will take their business elsewhere. Marketing might be a sub-specialist section of a company but the job of marketing is a whole organization function from Chairman to cleaner and from director to deliveryman.

As I mentioned previously there are three sides to the concept and process of achieving customer service and, of course, customer satisfaction and by definition retention. The first point we have briefly touched on and that is employees - making sure that you have recruited capable and trained staff in sufficient numbers and in the right place to meet customer demands. No one likes to be hassled or hustled when it comes to making any kind of purchase. But, customers like to feel that when they want advice that all retail store outlets, whether it be toys, clothes, shoes or even motor cars, have people close at hand, not lurking in attendance, to answer questions and the same applies to electronic systems. Indifference is off-putting and when there is insufficient staff around then customers will go elsewhere.

To begin with all companies these days, well those that intend to survive during the first decade of this century, have introduced electronic systems and databases for the input, storage, updating and retrieval of information relevant to their business.

But, do companies really know what they want in the database? Do they think about and specify the precise nature of the information that is important and how it might be used by other areas of the business? These database systems include, more often than not, the names, addresses and details of all their customers including focal point of contact. It is likely that the information will include area or specialisation of business, type of orders and amount or information provided to the customer and any repeat order schedules. The data should, sensibly, also include contact names and telephone numbers; however, all companies have to be extremely careful with such data collection and storage to ensure that they meet the demands of the data protection act (DPA).

The first point of contact in any organization is, often, through the switchboard or through direct connection to an appropriate section or department of a company. People, customers, do not want to be kept waiting or transferred from one section to another if they were put through to the wrong department in the first place. If and when that problem arises the first or second member of staff to answer the phonecall must make every effort to resolve that particular difficulty. Therefore, it is essential that staff attitude and manners are impeccable when answering telephone questions or customer complaints. The days of the nasally, affected and disinterested telephone voice should be long gone. Nothing is guaranteed more to put people off than arrogance, disinterest, dismissive statements or uncaring responses. Put simply, they will not come back to your company. Therefore, there has to be a fundamental change in attitude to dealing with questions and requests on the telephone and those responses have to be quicker and more effective.

And, that leads to the second part of the customer service equation and that is Strategy. A strategy is a plan that integrates an organization's manpower and other resources into a cohesive whole in order to achieve major goals and objectives and be able to respond to changing circumstances. It also involves a concerted effort to deliver and maintain quality products and services and a co-ordinated approach to meeting customer expectations. Once you have established your standard then customers know what to expect.

The third part of the process is to ensure that internal and external procedures are geared not to making company systems function but to making sure that the demands and expectations of customers, especially in terms of quality, are met. In the first instance, all staff should be trained to respond to queries and there should be enough employees to not only deal directly with customers but also to deal with problems. And, if they are not able to answer the question, employees should have the knowledge to be able to not only point a customer in the right direction but also, preferably, be able to provide a contact name and telephone number.

We are told, so often, that consumers have, in the past decade or so, become increasingly demanding and selective. But I am of the opinion that through improving standards of education and through greater knowledge and understanding of products and services customers have learned that they are the ones buying and therefore, they have the right to be choosy. Much of this information is readily available via the Internet and companies that do not make use of such a marketing tool are the ones who will lose out in the process. After all, if you provide the Internet site and you control, to some degree, the information that is posted on there then you know what customers are aware of. And they have also learned that they have a right to complain when you do not meet their requirements.

Customers are, apparently, looking for instant gratification and that is one reason why, it is suggested, that Internet electronic shopping is still not popular, the customer cannot see his purchase immediately and has to wait for delivery. However, if the difference in price between the same item in a retail store and an electronic store is substantial then customers will, increasingly, be prepared to wait for delivery especially when they know that they are achieving far greater value for money.

Secondly, there is an increasingly ethical and environmental dimension to the interests of consumers. No longer can a company afford to say, simply, that it is in business to increase shareholder value and provide dividends because they will, increasingly, be held accountable for a variety of social, moral, ethical and environmental issues. The concept that shareholders are the sole important factor must change and companies must embrace the notion of stakeholders, which is customers, employees and suppliers.

We British are, by definition, stoical. We often put up with poor customer services on public transport systems especially rail, bus and underground networks; we grudgingly accept poor service in cafes, bars and restaurants; and, we even put up with, mostly, young, inexperienced and unknowledgeable sales people in electrical and electronic stores who appear to spend much of their time chatting or fiddling with goods. Discussions with colleagues, contacts and associates suggest that one area where there is very poor customer service is with companies who deliver goods purchased from local, regional and national stores of every kind and even goods purchased via the Internet.

There is no need to be specific but all these delivery companies, and there are many examples, deliver goods only between the hours of 0830 and 1700 daily, they do not deliver on Saturdays and they will not indicate a specific time of day or timeframe in which they will affect delivery. Many will not even indicate am, which is between 0800 and 1200, or pm, that is between 1200 and 1700. Given that most people are at work between the hours of 0830 and 1700 it means that goods are often not delivered when required or when expected and that means either having to drive to a local delivery store to meet the timeframe and availability of the company providing the service. That is NOT customer service and appears to be back to front?

And, what happens if people are not happy with the attitude and approach of sales people or not happy with the goods they have been sold or not happy with the system of delivery? Many people will simply not bother to complain; few will take the time and effort to complete customer complaint forms; and, most will not take the time and effort to write to the Chairman, Chief Executive or Managing Director to indicate their dissatisfaction. This is usually because complaints go unanswered, staff can be most unhelpful and compensation tends to be poor and given grudgingly. But, they will grumble to their spouses, their relatives, their friends and colleagues and to anyone else who raises the subject or issue during conversation whether at work or on trains, buses and planes.

So, it is reasonable to suggest that the companies and organizations that will succeed are those that will go the extra mile to, somehow, exceed the expectations of customers in order to remain in business. Then there is the constant threat of increased competition, not just from new competitors in the same field but from older companies re-engineering and re-inventing themselves. And losing orders means that companies must look for ways and means of improving quality and service. Never forget that most, if not all companies, are in the business of providing information whether it is advice, guidance, marketing or selling. You have to provide the system and the people to provide that information as quickly, efficiently and correctly as possible.

Unfortunately, when economic downturns impact on the operating profit levels of companies the concept of quality and customer satisfaction is undermined when companies look for ways of cutting costs and the only way they seem to know how to do this is to cut the number of employees.

And, with the gradual, but inexorable, introduction of on-line shopping it is imperative that companies not only consider and provide electronic shopping but they must make their website inviting. They have to make sure their products or services are not just of a high quality but that they are competitively priced. And, just as important, they must train and re-train staff to understand the fundamental principles of computer and electronic systems such that they can help prospective customers to access the necessary information, and place orders, from the website. And, never forget that electronic systems tend to be available 24 hours a day at the convenience of the customer and not limited to company working hours.

Other organizations need to introduce a change in company culture, for example, public rail and road transport system providers. The Rail Network Operators are, for the most part, still staffed by people who worked for the previous nationalised British Rail. The result is that some are still under the impression that they are operating trains and managing a rail network that runs from A to Z via B, C, D and E. The fact of the matter is the workforce has to understand that they are no longer running a train system but providing a service. And, a big part of that service means making sure that trains run on time and to schedule, that seats are available and that customers are kept informed, immediately, of delays and difficulties. The antiquated British Railways regulations are well past their 'sell-by-date' and it is time they were re-written to take account of customer service.

And, the airline industry is not much better. How many times have you arrived well in advance of the time of departure only to be informed, when you arrive at the often-unhelpful check-in desk, that either the plane is delayed or there has been a problem with their computer systems or they have overbooked the flight or the aircraft has gone unserviceable? How many airline companies have boasted about their seamless service to transport you around the world and leave you stranded at some grossly overcrowded or out-of-the-way airport without any idea of when you might complete your journey? Frankly, if they were to take half the time and effort to get things right in the first place then they might not have irate passengers wanting to know where their plane, where their baggage is or how they are going to handle a particular problem if they concentrated a great deal more on customer service.

One final, and important, part of customer service is dealing with complaints. Of course if you have put the right people and the right processes and procedures in place the product or service you have provided will not generate a complaint. However, just in case something does go wrong you, as a company, must be able to respond immediately and deal with any possible problem by acting quickly and courteously to resolve matters. A system must be in place that allows staff to approve compensation for slow or bad service. If you do not then, again, the customer will not return. And, do not forget that it costs a great deal more, in advertising and marketing, to gain new customers than it does to retain the one's you already have.

A company can quickly lose customers if it does not meet their demands. If you really want to make sure that you first of all attract and retain customers then you need to introduce a complaints system and procedure that allows them to tell you when something is not right or when they are not happy with the quality, reliability, cost and accessibility of your goods or services. You also need to ensure that you have a system in place that quickly allows customer complaints to be noted, assessed and a fair and reasonable response despatched in an acceptable timescale.

And, for those of you who might be interested in considering such a complaints process and implementing a policy and plan then you might purchase a copy of the British Standard BS 8600:1999: Complaints management systems – Guide to design and implementation. It is understood that this guide, or something very similar and based on the content of the British Standard guide, is now being processed through the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) for distribution as an International Standard on Complaints Management Systems.

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