

Raising the Service Bar.....substantially!

During the many conferences and seminars I give each year, I regularly ask the delegates if over the past 5 to 10 years they have changed their attitude or behaviour in any way when they are customers. The answers I get are almost always yes, they have changed considerably, and they are now –

- Better informed
- More demanding
- More 'picky' and/or 'fussy'
- Less patient
- More likely to complain when things go wrong or are not right
- More likely to tell others about poor service
- More likely to switch providers if things are not as they want or expect

And it doesn't matter where in the world I am, in affluent countries like Dubai, Germany or Switzerland, or less affluent ones like Poland, Romania or Turkey, the answers are always similar. So this change in customer's behaviour is international.

Customers are much the same, so it follows that if you have changed, your customers will probably have changed in the same ways too. And if customers have changed, the customer service techniques and processes we use will probably need to be changed too. It's likely that the ones that used to work in the past may not work any more, or at least may not be as effective as they were.

Yet when I ask what are the substantial differences that the delegate's organisations have made to their customer service techniques and processes, I regularly find myself struggling to find many (if any) examples of major changes or improvements. But if customer expectations (like ours) have substantially increased over the past few years (which they have), yet the standards and style of customer service generally haven't, we should not be surprised to find that customer dissatisfaction and churn rates have been increasing (in many cases substantially) for many organisations.

The way to address this is obviously to change and/or improve the style or quality of service being delivered. But here again there is often a misunderstanding about what actually needs to be done. It should be obvious that a few short training courses for existing front line people, to make them a bit more attentive, or smile more often, or look the customer in the eye, or use the customer's name more frequently, is unlikely to have any worthwhile lasting effect. (Yet many organisations seem to be convinced it will!) The analogy I often use is equivalent to raising the bar a notch or two in a high jump event. You may be able to jump the bar at the chosen new height, and it may even be higher than your competitors are currently jumping, but if it is just a few notches up it's not going to be seen as very different by customers (in many cases it's not even noticed) and competitors will soon be jumping the same height or higher. So if you do gain any competitive advantage it is likely to be short lived.

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What's needed to do this in the customer service arena is not much different than what's needed to do it in the sporting arena. There will be techniques and skills that made you good at the high jump that will also help you in the pole vault. But simply getting better at those will be insufficient for success; you'll also need to learn a lot of new techniques and skills. So in the same way, many of the existing service approaches will also complement the new approach. But there will also be many new ones that will need to be learned for success. And most importantly, some of the old ones will have to be scrapped to make room for the new ones. This will probably be uncomfortable for a while. It may even mess things up during the transition. (Tiger Woods has changed his swing three times during his career. Each time it messed his game up for a while until he became comfortable and better with his new swing.) But doing the same things will always create the same results, so it's essential to do different things, even if it hurts for a while, to change and improve the results.

I've learned from the various projects of this type I've worked on that there are four key elements that have a major impact on overall success and long term sustainability. These are –

Top-Down Commitment

Leaders must obviously be committed to the project, but they must also be seen to be committed to it. Leaders' actions and behaviours always tell their colleagues much more about what matters to them than their words and gestures. It's therefore important for leaders to be prepared to 'lead from the front' and begin by investing their own time to learn about the subject. They then need to keep investing their time and effort in the ongoing implementation project (s) so that they are seen by all to be fully supportive of what everyone else is doing. To quote Professor John Kotter of Harvard Business School, *"Having set the direction, and aligned everyone behind it, they must continue to motivate and inspire people to sustain their efforts to achieve the goals"*. This necessary motivation and inspiration will not come from e-mails and newsletters; it only comes from seeing and hearing leaders on the 'front line.'

Inside-Out Approach

You can't create a worthwhile difference with a thin veneer of great service on the external surface of your organisation, especially if the internal service is poor. With a veneer of wood on poor or rotten base wood – surface scratches soon expose the poor wood and in time the rot breaks through the veneer. In the same way, to create a lasting worthwhile difference through service you must start with the systems, processes, structure and culture inside the organisation, make whatever changes or improvements are necessary to create internal service excellence and gradually work out to customers. Put simply, what's on the inside always shows on the outside. So although it takes longer to adopt an inside-out approach, it's the only one that will make a worthwhile sustainable difference.

Step-by-Step Progress

The way to implement the change is then person by person, team by team, branch by branch, process by process, project by project, etc. This systematic, step by step approach gets everyone involved and should create continuous improvement because each step creates a new position with a new perspective which should make clear what the next step(s) should be.

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Implement with Pace

Change that happens slowly doesn't feel like change; it is rarely noticed by customers and competitors can easily keep up with it. So to make a worthwhile difference the change must take place with a fast pace. This means that the leaders must be impatient and inject a sense of urgency into the programme. To quote from Allan Leighton's book on Leadership, 'Urgency is Energy:', "If you want the programme to have energy, you must implement it with urgency."

So there you have it, a few ideas about how it is possible to make a substantial difference to business success as a result of a step change in service delivery. I'm pleased to say that all of the programmes I've worked on, where all the above elements were in place, have been remarkably successful. So I know it works and I hope it will work for you too.

About Author Chris Daffy and CustomerImpact

CustomerImpact, a leader in combining customer feedback and business intelligence solutions, and Chris Daffy, a leader in customer experience management and service strategy have joined forces to show companies how to make service excellence and customer centricity deliver immediate business value and sustainable growth. From business consulting through to design and implementation services, CustomerImpact and the Academy of Service Excellence are uniquely positioned to help companies build a customer-centric culture and world-class customer service. Their individual competencies in program execution and customer service consulting combine to deliver a complete solution for companies eager to profit from lasting customer loyalty.

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