

CUSTOMER SERVICE – WHY IT IS SO POOR AND HOW TO IMPROVE IT

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ABSTRACT

Everyone knows that customer service is important. By understanding that customers are their sole reason for the companies to be in the business and especially in today's highly competitive business environment, customer satisfaction makes a real difference. But, how many people and how many companies truly commit themselves in providing customers what they want and finding ways to improve the quality of their service? Companies need to be more people-conscious, because, customer service is everyone's job. If companies cannot care for the employees or colleagues welfare at work first, it is obvious companies will have hard time to get service out of the employees. Dissatisfied employees can never deliver good and quality service to other customers. The bottom-line is how the companies treat the employees.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Service Excellence, Internal and External Customers

INTRODUCTION

“All our customer service officers are busy at the moment. Please hold and we will attend to you shortly. If you know the extension number, please dial the number. Press 1 to speak to any customer service officer, press 2 to leave message, press 3 to disconnect or press 0 for the operator.”

Sound familiar, doesn't it? Well, this is one of the 'we-think-this-is-what-customers-want' syndromes. The question is why is this happening? One obvious reason is, companies always interpret customer satisfaction according to their own way of thinking and refuse to put themselves in the customers' shoes. Service

providers must remember that customers are always the kings. Treat them with care and give them all the attention required. Along the way these will create customer's loyalty and help to spur the business of the company.

Companies should look up into this matter seriously and they should find ways to improve the quality of their services. They need to implement customer service programme as one of the corporate culture agendas and concentrate this programme first to the front-line staff whose jobs require them to handle customers. The rest of the employees can follow the programme later because this programme takes a longer time to be developed.

Nevertheless, there are basically two aspects to customer service: attitude and delivery. For instance, like the telephone answering system, no doubt that advance technology system is good. However, after while customer might give up when the arm started to ache but the music continued played over and over. So, who are the losing party here? Not the customers, definitely.

By the way, what is wrong with old personal touch of human telephone operators? The truth is advance systems are cheaper to maintain besides the human operators who tend to be rude when under stress. However, if the companies are willing to pay well, surely there are good operators available. Besides, customers can always lodge a complaint against them. This can also help companies improve their quality service!

Finally, in order to get the right people for the job, companies must be willing to invest money and time in the employees' training. It all depends on how the companies treat the employees. Like the saying goes, those who pay peanuts, will only get monkeys. In short, company needs to be more people-conscious.

SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Organization should understand that everything is all about people – hiring the right people, developing their attitude of wanting to serve, training them in simple techniques, which should come from right from the heart and caring for their welfare. Employers should never consider employees are not important. They should put staffs not customers first. Happy staffs create delighted customers. High priority should be given to the development of the employees. Furthermore, to achieve service excellence, the source of secure, profitable and long term growth require organization to attract, satisfy and retain employees better than new customers.

Employees are unlikely to deliver excellent service if employees are unsure of how to deliver excellent service, if they think they know how but are wrong, and if they believe management does not really care about service.

Excellence service providers understand the needs of the employees first. However, they must ensure employees understand their individual part in the overall service excellence picture. But how to achieve this? Firstly, communicate the company's vision to the employees. Ensure employees understand their own individual impact and input to the corporation's success. Leaders must be creative. Find ways to explore innovative ways of communication with the employees and must attract their attention. Use communication as one of the ways to get employees' feedback on various issues concerning their work and work place.

Nevertheless, companies that emphasis on developing, training, motivating, recognizing, rewarding and empowering people will be more successful than they are in attaining service excellence.

LEADERSHIP AND TEAMWORK

It is leadership, which builds the environment where everyone in the organization can contribute. Leaders must make work fun and provide people with challenge – people normally achieve more when they want to come to work. Make everyone feels important. Consequently, staffs who are eager to improve and happy to take challenge will in turn lead to delighted customers. Create environment where people enjoy coming to work

Obviously, leaders must be committed to promoting the culture of customer care and environment in which people are free and encouraged to serve the need of individual customers. Employees need to be responsive and empathy toward customers where they must be willing to help customers, provide prompt services, respond to customers request and give some attention to their customers. "Make your customers the centre of your culture"

Leaders must also emphasis teamwork among the employees. Through **TEAM - Together Everyone Achieve More**. Above all, teamwork and a 'make it happen' mentality are the vital ingredients in any success. Job performance, company performance, product value and customer satisfaction all improve when people in the same department or work group begin supporting and assisting each other and emphasize cooperation instead of competition.

Companies should also react positively and fast to any problems that the customers raised. Take this as an opportunity for them to improve their services and gain an advantage against their competitors.

However, to create the richest form of service teamwork requires long – lasting team membership, frequent team contact and communication, team leadership, direction and goals and team measurement and reward.

THE COMPANY AND QUALITY CONCEPT

Picture this. You walk into a bank. After taking your number, you find a seat to wait for your turn. Time goes by but the numbers do not move. Out of seven counters only three are open. You become irritable and twitchy. Finally, as you reach your peak of annoyance, your number is called out and when you reach the counter, you are told that it is an issue for customer service – which has no numbering process and has to queue to talk to the personnel, that is invisible!

Does that sound familiar too like the telephone answering system? How annoying it is? Well, not because there was not anyone to help you but because they could not be bothered. Only after you have thrown a tantrum, the personnel pay some attention. Advice – next time you feel you are getting poor service, do not just sit back and accept it. Make known your dissatisfaction. Chances are you will get better service right away. What a shame but that is the real life situation and you have to make a big fuss to get it!

Isn't it understood that any customer focused organization must have a clear sense of direction and a shared set of values which are understood throughout the organization? Each and everyone in the organization is totally responsible for delivering quality service because it is now generally accepted that product quality by itself is not sufficient to win customers' attention. Companies must know who their customers are; their needs and how are those needs being met.

Studies indicate that two of the principle causes of poor service quality are placing the wrong people in the service role and giving employees too little control over the service. Why do these situations exist? Simple, it is just because most managers do not think like marketers when it comes to human resource issues. They think marketing as something people do to win over customers but not something people do to win over employees – for example, the employment advertisements are look-alike advertisement in fine print selling “jobs” rather than careers. Moreover, managers do not have a well-defined profile of people to hire.

Therefore, knowing the current situations, managers can overcome the problems by hiring full-time personnel earning wages plus commissions and avoid part-time workers. Use service standards as a basis for various positions and written “ideal

candidate” profiles that reflect the service standards. Managers must provide employees with strong foundation culture in which to work, offer them strategic direction and give them the company specific training and education they need to perform their roles.

Obviously, people who are qualified will perform better and stay longer if given room to maneuver, achieve and grow. On the other hand, creating an organization that is easy to do business with, securing the right skill and power in the right place to satisfy the customer are the critical aspect of quality service. Company can also ensure staffs are multi-skilled in order to meet fluctuation in demand for different services. In the long run, quality reduces costs and it must be part and parcel of the millions of transaction. As what Haskett’s concept noted:



Productivity is how efficient service inputs are transformed into value outputs where else quality is something about people’s satisfaction, expectation, need and want. Once the employees are satisfied, it will lead to customers’ satisfaction. From there it can create customer loyalty. Having customer’s loyalty ensure profit and growth for companies.

TRAINING

Training is a vital element in achieving quality. If company increases the training cost, it will pay off in greater productivity, improved customer service and a better-motivated workforce. People normally count on the service and the promise associated with the corporation’s image. Isn’t it obvious that employee satisfaction equals customer satisfaction, happy and motivated employee the cheerfulness will come out in the way they serve customers? In fact, training can

be regarded as an incentive for employees and it is one way of reducing employee turnover. Also training can change attitude and behavior patterns.

However, the training programme designed must be work-related and enhance employees' skills, help with career development, help career path both within and outside the company and there is a reward system attached to their performance as a result of the training. It is important that employees be aware from the start what is the objective of the training and how they can actually benefit from it.

On the contrary, a company that refuse to invest time and money in employees' training, will find it is hard to get much service out of the employees themselves. If company cannot care for the employees definitely it cannot care for the customers.

Companies should provide opportunities for employees to attend seminars that will improve their skills. To foster career guidance, set up a mentorship programme that pairs high-level executives with young professionals. Having contented workers who are committed to their jobs leads to better customer service and greater employee retention.

THE INTERNAL CUSTOMERS

Employees are the backbone for any companies. Without them, companies could not function properly. Can companies retain good employees? How? As the general rule of thumb – if the employees are satisfied, they will do anything for you. So, companies must find ways to satisfy, care and motivate their employees.

If committed employees know the direction the company is going and all work in the same direction, then the process of customer service will be easy. It is crucial that employees understand how they can contribute to achieve the company's goals. Communicate with the employees what are the companies' expectations towards them. Therefore, companies must have a clear sense of direction and a shared set of values that are understood throughout the organization.

To recognize employees' performance, companies can employ a variety of methods – give instant cash reward or thank you card to anyone who is doing great job. People always want to be appreciated and their effort is being recognized. Just a simple pat on the shoulder sometimes can make a lot of difference. Furthermore, companies can always give employees training to pursue business improvement. Measure employees' performance because this can keep them on their toes and test employees' morale through regular staff feedback. Encourage employees to performance by giving recognition for excellence performance.

Make employees feel important by allowing them to make decisions, which they are comfortable with. Empowering gives the employees more authority to solve customers' complaints on the spot instead of passing it up to the organization. Through empowerment, employees develop ownership attitudes when they are treated like part-owners of the business and are expected to act that part. These employees will manage themselves, more likely to work hard, account for their own performance and the company's and take prudent to build a strong business and sustain the company success.

Besides, companies can survey employees opinion to test morale and priority areas for improvement. Also corporation realizes that in order to increase productivity, they must take more active role in the care of their employees' children. Corporation who gets involved with child-care will normally has low turnover and low absenteeism among parents whose children attend the centre.

By allowing job sharing where two employees share one job, can be more productive also. In fact, company should consider a flexible-hours as an attractive option for employees because allowing flexible-hours open company's doors to alternative workforces such as homemakers and retirees. Consequently, by developing a work schedule that meets both company's needs and employee needs, productivity will increase, absenteeism will decrease and employees' morale will soar.

Finally, whatever the incentive that company tries to reward employees, make sure it meets a real need of the employee.

THE EXTERNAL CUSTOMERS

Why do some companies fail? This is because they take the customers for granted and assume they understand the customers' need. It is vital for companies to analyze the customers' need thoroughly at the very start. Basically, all the customers want the staffs to be helpful, friendly, willing, attentive, obliging, polite, professional and cheerful. They also want staffs to provide an efficient, prompt service, always keep customers informed, respond to individual need take ownership of problems and earn customers' trust.

Consequently, companies should improve business from the customer service perspective. Encourage customer feedback including complaints. Through complaints companies can improve the service and understand the customers' problem and need. Deal with complaints as quickly as possible. In other word, link customers' feedback to corrective action.

Here are some guidelines in handling customers' complaints effectively:

- Service provider needs to anticipate complaints

- Thank customers and encourage them to talk about the problems to really understand the problem
- Listen to complaints regardless of how small the complaint is
- Keep record of complaints so that steps can be taken to overcome complaints
- Follow-up complaints with immediate action to keep customer satisfied

Along the way, company must foster long-term relationship with customers through helpline, road show, communicate with them in person and if possible involve them in product development. Make sure the client databases are updated regularly. This can provide an ideal tool for encouraging long-term relationship and understand customers buying pattern.

Furthermore, company must take note that consumers evaluate the overall performance of a service by the following five components:

Reliability

The ability to perform the service dependably, accurately and consistently. It is performing the service right the first time. This component has been found to be the one most important to consumer. As for the service providers, they must make sure the service they deliver must satisfy the consumer to ensure the consumer will come back for the same service.

Responsiveness

The ability to provide prompt service such as serving fast and efficient meal or calling customer back quickly.

Assurance

The knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. Skilled employees who treat customers with respect and make customers feel that they can trust the company exemplifies assurance.

Empathy

The ability of the employees to care and to provide individualized attention. Companies, whose employees recognize customers, call them by name and learn their customers' specific requirements are providing empathy.

Tangible

the physical evidence of the service including equipment and appearance of personnel.

Knowing what the customers are looking in any service, company should maintain and/or enhance customer satisfaction since satisfied customers positively influence a company's future cash flows.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, customer service is everyone's job and it has to start from the inside of the companies. The employees must come first. Companies should care for the employees' benefit and satisfaction because ultimately they will serve the customers happily. Good employers will cultivate and enhance employees' satisfaction, customer focused, continuous improvement process that would attract, retain and build long-term relationships with employees as individual.

By asking the customers and interviewing the employees, companies will get a good feel for what should be improved. Always benchmark performance against that of leading companies in other industry sector will allow companies to measure and ensure quality service. A focus on customer satisfaction, continuous improvement and a visible recognition of individual performance and team performance is a winning formula for company success.

Finally, always talk positively, use correct telephone etiquette, always be consistent to one simple thing – return the phone calls! Indeed company's reputations are built or destroyed by this one test of manners. Be ambassador inside and outside the company because employees represent the companies' image in the eyes of the outsiders. Ensure that to whatever policies or systems companies establish, are to support the needs of the customers.

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