

FIVE TIPS FOR DELIVERING EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE

In today's global marketplace, there are still few companies who truly deliver outstanding service on a consistent basis. Yet service is a source of competitive advantage. Meeting and exceeding customers' expectations leads to greater customer retention, enhanced reputation and increased profitability and stakeholder value. Those businesses who truly deliver exceptional service adopt five principles:

1. Listen to customers

Best practice organisations use a variety of techniques to better understand and anticipate customer needs. These include traditional market research techniques such as customer satisfaction surveys and telephone interviews. More enlightened companies also use customer focus groups or customer panels to gain insights into customers' views, opinions and feelings.

A further technique that is useful to adopt is empathetic research. This involves shadowing the purchase patterns of the customer as they experience your product and services in order to fully understand their feelings at different stages of the experience. Harley Davidson the motorcycle manufacturer for example runs a successful Harley Davidson Club where employees undertake bike journeys alongside customers to fully understand their views.

2. Recruit for attitude

Recruit for attitude, train for skills. Organisations which are customer-centric recruit and select people who have a positive attitude towards the customer and high levels of energy to get things done. These people demonstrate winning behaviours towards the customer. They are not cynics (who have a poor attitude and high energy levels), or victims who display a 'I can't and I won't help' attitude or a spectators who 'would if they could'. Rather they have a 'can do' approach which means that they deliver high levels of customer service. Businesses can then train skills and competence.

Attitude +ve

Spectators (I would if I could..)	Winners (I can, I will)
Victims (I can't, I won't)	Cynics (It won't, it can't)

Attitude -ve

Low

Energy

High

3. Ensure everyone serves the customer

Too often people who work in back office positions within organisations fail to appreciate the impact of their actions on the customer. The internal request that does not get processed or the lengthy delay in reply, the processes that are bureaucratic and cumbersome all have an impact on the end customer. Businesses should ensure that they instil a philosophy throughout the organisation that everyone serves the customer. This means providing opportunities for back office staff to interact and appreciate what it is like on the front line and promoting the recognition that there are internal as well as external customers. At coffee chain Pret a Manager for example, everyone from Head Office spends at least two days a year working in a branch.

4. Continually strive for improvement

Customer's expectations are constantly rising. To continue to be successful businesses today need to continually innovate and improve. This means being aware of trends and finding novel ways to deliver a service or new product ideas. So for example, in the airline marketplace companies are increasingly recognising the power of the total customer experience. They continue to bring out products that appeal to business class passengers for example both via the experience they receive before and after the flight.

5. Lead by example

Simple as it sounds, if you want your business to be customer-centric, then the leadership team needs to demonstrate behaviours that show that they are customer-centric. Spend time with customers, take an active interest in their views. Take a personal interest in and act on the results of customer surveys; put customer service on all agenda items. What you do and say in relation to service excellence will set the tone for the rest of the business.

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