



How to deliver

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superior customer service

Consumer sovereignty

Sales and service are intertwined. Customers are the kings. They make choices, deciding what services, such as accounting and related services, to buy and who to buy from. Their choices for accounting personnel are based on trust, an essential component of the relationship between service provider and customer. The choices that clients make determine the long-term survival of an organization. Most of us like to be in control, whether of things, situations or circumstances. We continue to patronise particular service providers if we have faith and confidence in products and services on offer there.

An organization that is able to build customer loyalty and retain its customers will succeed. The bridge between the company and customers is its people. Customers may not always be right: however, they can be educated, persuaded to see things or to behave in a rational manner if their needs and concerns are addressed. Sales and service are interactive processes and the role of frontline staff is invaluable to the organization's success.

Moments of truth

Every contact point is important. Customer service is

a system (which consists of a number of processes) to provide a *continuous link* between the *first moment or contact* the customer has with the organization until *the goods or services are received* with the objective of *satisfying customers' needs on a long-term basis*. The impressions the customers have of the organization, be it good or bad, are based on their initial contact. The first contact can be a flyer, the website or staff: in other words, the contact can be passive or interactive. Both types of contact are important. For example, would you have confidence in a company whose marketing or promotional material looks messy and is incomprehensible? The first contact here (passive contact) is likely to sow seeds of doubt in the customer's mind and discourages further interaction and requests for sales and services (See figure 1).



The first impression counts and every contact that constitutes the *continuous link of customer service* serves as an opportunity to demonstrate the organization's capability and value.

Customer service is measurable

Customer service is more than being polite and nice. While it may require soft skills (such as people-handling skills), it also requires efficient systems, processes and organization to deliver the service. No one likes waiting to be served, no matter how polite and charming the service provider is. The outcome of superior service delivered can be demonstrated and measured through the use of performance indicators such as queue length, response time, accuracy, reliability, the number of compliments and complaints, repeated sales, and so on. Thus, providing excellent service is good for business and it is this prerequisite that distinguishing a successful organization from a mediocre one.

How to deliver superior customer service

Statistics suggest that more than 90 percent of dissatisfied customers don't bother to complain, and that one dissatisfied customer will tell nine others. These statistics are rather disconcerting. It pays to examine and address possible barriers to delivering superior customer service.

People, training and development

People serve as the bridge between the organization and its customers; therefore, customers expect that service providers will be in the position to answer their queries and concerns. The service providers must be "in the know", i.e. they should know:

- About the organization's products and services
- Who's who in the organization so that they can refer queries to the appropriate people instead of sending customers on a merry-go-round
- Have a detailed knowledge of their job and how to get problems resolved

There is nothing more annoying for customers than having to deal with service providers who do not know

their jobs properly and who consequently give the wrong information.

The organization has the duty to train and develop its staff so that they can perform. The staff represent the organization: they are the bridge between service providers and their customers, and it is good business for them to be well trained.

Organizational structure, systems, processes and procedures

Service providers need to be effective and efficient. An organization must have the appropriate empowered authority, policies and procedures and, efficient systems and processes to facilitate getting work done. Technology and automation are often needed to support how work can be accomplished efficiently.

Infrastructure

Changes in customer expectations, technology and environment often require upgrading in infrastructure. This may include presentable receptions, new computers, telephones, and so on.

Service culture and attitude

Leadership sets the tone. What gets measured gets done. A service culture can be cultivated from the top down (i.e. with an emphasis on nurturing staff from the top) and from the bottom up, (i.e. continuous learning and development and applying the knowledge learned on the job) with the objective of satisfying customer needs and keeping customers on a long-term basis. If everyone, from top leadership to the frontline, focuses on service attitude demonstrable through behaviour, the company will develop an appropriate service culture. **T/D**

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