The Ultimate Service – Customer Satisfaction

Think about your last experience as a customer. How were you treated? If there was an issue, how was it dealt with? How was the entire purchasing experience? Based on your perception, would you re-visit this company? Despite being a very basic concept and an obvious one, quality customer service continues to elude many companies today. Simply meeting your customer's core service requirements qualifies you only to compete, with no guarantee to win the business or garner loyalty. In order to gain loyalty, a company needs to connect with the customer and the customer needs to connect with the company.

Several reasons have been put forth to explain the lack of a successful customer service program in companies. Being the only provider within a geography, selling a superior product or having a market dominant position could bring about an arrogant attitude. Complacency makes leadership live with the hope that past success could help steer the company into the future. Companies trying to provide quality customer service have been distracted by negative outcomes and thereby have a mis-placed focus on fixing the outcomes instead. Then there are those finance chiefs who want a projection, a cost/benefit analysis and an ROI-based analysis before they stamp their approval on any customer service initiative!

Lack of commitment to customer service, from the top, is an issue that impacts all initiatives. If leadership does not provide strong support from top down, the proposed initiative of customer service will likely fail. A focus on what's in it for the company *instead* of what's in it for the customer is a very popular recipe for disaster. A mechanistic approach to customer service with a focus on efficiency, consistency and cost effectiveness *instead* of an approach such as responsive empathy, focused on skill, experience and customization, usually will fail to meet the objective. Besides all of the above, we have to keep an eye on changing demographics and technology, because as in fashion and fads, customer needs keep changing as well.

Companies like Disney, Nordstrom, Enterprise, Starbucks, Lexus, and others understand what great customer service means and what it involves. Enterprise is determined to keep customers happy; the company also strives to hire smart and talented people. Management concluded that in order for employees to provide outstanding customer service, the employees must be committed to their jobs and have proper incentives.

All Starbucks employees are called "part-ners." From day one, Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks, made clear his belief that partner satisfaction leads to customer satisfaction. The company has a generous policy of giving health insurance and stock options to even the most entry level partners, and management encourages promotions from within company ranks. All employees are provided training on "hard skills" (mix drinks, cash register) and on "soft skills" (to connect with customers – smile, eye contact, etc.).

Then there's the story of Toyota, which announced the arrival of a luxury car called Lexus back in the late 1980s. Soon after its initial sales, a few cars were detected to have a problem. The company recalled every car, but it was not the recall that did it; every notice had an apology and an offer to pick up every car, fix it, wash it, and top it with gas and a return!

In the end, only one thing really matters in a service encounter – the customer's perception of what took place. As such, there needs to be a total focus on all underlying factors that affect those perceptions. So put yourself in the shoes of a customer and simulate the experience. What positive action can be enhanced? What negative event needs to be eliminated? What are the non-value added processes? Where are the distractions? Where can you offer a choice to the customer? How can the entire experience be "etched" into the mind of the customer?

Following are some keys in creating a quality customer service program:

- lead from the top and send a strong message to the organization that quality customer service is here to stay;
- hire smart and talented people;
- structure and offer appropriate incentives to all employees;
- provide the necessary training to help your employees learn how to deliver great customer service;
- give the necessary information and authority to each employee so that every employee can and will solve problems that arise – in that there will be no "passing of the problem" to another;
- ensure that each employee understands he/she is the "face" of the company;
- constantly re-train your employees;
- obtain feedback from customers about your company's performance on a regular basis; and
- on every possible occasion, THANK your employees for what they do and THANK all customers for their business.

Simply proclaiming a quality customer service strategy is not enough. It must be applied sensibly throughout the organization. The opportunity is there for the CPA to maximize company returns by adopting an entrepreneurial approach to vision, strategy and execution. ✳

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