



Management and Performance Associates – July 2008

What part of Customer Service don't you understand?

Last week we contacted a distinguished publisher to buy an article to be used in conjunction with one of our courses and had a very bad customer experience. To add insult to injury we were trying to buy an article about Customer Service. Total disconnect between what the publisher is famous for (not to mention the content of the article) and the service provided by their employee thousands of miles away from head office. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated event.

Nobody sincerely believes that companies have a policy of providing bad customer service. But in the end, that's what most of us get when trying to have our computers fixed, our internet connection re-established, buying a ticket to our dream vacation (worse, to a business travel, which is more common), etc.. You get the idea.

Through advertising, companies brag about their fantastic products, prices, conditions and customer service. Why is there a disconnect between the promise and the delivery?

Simple. We don't buy a product from the CEO or the Chief Marketing Officer, or from the advertising agency. When buying a product or service we deal with employees at the bottom of the pyramid: the salesperson (who obviously did not see the advertisement in *The Economist*), the airline check-in agent (who doesn't feel he represents "something special in the air,") and worst of all, the infamous Telephone Customer Service Rep (usually from a distant land, sometimes unable to speak your language or understand your culture—forget about understanding your needs and empathizing).

When Customer Service Reps are "just doing their job" and reading from a screen that is not updated to reflect the latest changes in corporate strategy, who is to blame? This article will focus on the disconnect between Head office (Corporate staff, strategies, marketing and advertising plans) and the *real* people we face when dealing with a corporation.

Here are some ideas to improve this situation:

Attracting and retaining a quality workforce

Yes, here we go again. At MAPA Consulting we strongly believe that it all starts with recruiting the right people for the job. The customer service job does not pay millions in bonuses, we know that, but that doesn't mean that we will hire only unskilled people. Moreover, forget about the skills. You can train those. What about people that really care about the customers, who have developed their emotional intelligence, who are able to show empathy, who are curious and innovative, who have an accountability attitude, and who don't blame everything on others – the policy, procedures, and computers? Flight attendants at Southwest probably make the same salary that their colleagues at American do, but they for sure have more fun. Why? Their profile.

Achieving consistent delivery and execution

You may like Starbucks . . . or not, but when you walk in a store, it doesn't matter if you're in Paris, Texas or Paris, France, it's the same experience. Customers appreciate that. When I call my bank to clarify a charge on my credit card, if I manage to talk to a human being, I usually get inconsistent service depending on the rep who answered my call. How can consistent service be achieved? Assuming you've hired the right people, now they need to be trained and coached, and be given proper tools to effectively perform on the job.

Find a balance between satisfying employees and customers

A basic belief we have is that motivated and empowered employees will be nicer to customers and will stay longer on the job. Employees that are struggling with bureaucracy, obsolete systems and procedures, paperwork, etc., will find it harder to deliver a memorable customer experience. Also, managers and supervisors can make every situation a learning experience, instead of a session of criticism.

Business intelligence

Your employees are in direct contact with the client several times a day. Why aren't they consulted when corporate staff makes decisions? All those



calls received by call centers are valuable information about not so memorable client experiences. If the data collected from thousands of interactions with real customers are not analyzed and fed into real marketing plans, companies are just throwing money out the window.

Our final recommendation is the most basic skill (but mostly unused): **Effective two-way communication**. Make sure your employees understand the company's vision, mission, goals, marketing plans and strategies. Having this information on a website is not enough. Do not relegate these topics only to senior executives and managers. Listen to your employees. Ask them for their opinions. You might save a lot of money with consultants and focus groups.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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