customer care

everyone agrees it's a necessity

so why is it that standards are still low?

Steve Shellabear explores the conditions that affect companies attempting to provide customer care and offers suggestions as to how they might organise themselves better to provide it.

It seems to me that there's a plethora of information available about how to 'look after your customer'. Many of us working in training and business, feel like we've heard it all before. Simple principle-based truisms such as 'the customer's always right' and 'put the customer first', which many of us can remember being prominent years ago, have evolved into more sophisticated concepts such as 'relationship management', and 'adding value'. How these terms are defined often depends upon the consultant you speak with. However, most would agree that customer care is an important component of most commercial training programmes, if not the organising principle. It has to be. All organisations have customers of some kind, whether internal or external. Satisfying them is intrinsic to any organisation's survival and growth.

Assuming you are a training professional who has worked with corporates on customer care, it's likely you'll be aware of information such as 'it's six times more expensive to generate new customers, as opposed to selling to existing ones'. You are also likely to be familiar with commonly quoted figures like 'a dissatisfied customer tells 13-16 people about their experiences, as opposed to a satisfied customer who only tells five'.

Research tells us that 69% of customers leave their suppliers for 'people-based reasons'. In my experience this type of information is regularly given to customer-facing staff in training sessions. For many delegates hearing it for the first time it carries a strong impact. Certainly no one will seriously dispute the importance of empathising with the customer, anticipating their needs and being proactive in helping them get what they want.

Yet, even with this seemingly obvious commercial imperative and the multitude of information available in the public domain, poor service is rampant. If you doubt this is the case, I challenge you to ask any group you're training or working with for examples of good and poor service they've experienced as customers. I've found that most participants can recall two or three stories of being badly treated to every one positive experience. In most cases, how the staff served them, (or didn't) as well as the eventual outcome, were important. Now, this could be that as human beings we have tendency to recall events where we experienced strong negative thoughts and feelings. Perhaps our self-image or pride was hurt or we had to argue our case and felt misunderstood, the emotion etching it into our memories.

Certainly, it is easy to take good service for granted, and dismiss it as the norm or 'that's what I'm paying for'. Whilst this attitude is prevalent in customers it can be compound by front-line staff who simply go through the motions in doing their job, doing nothing more and nothing less. Staff who give a processed response devoid of any emotion or interest are likely to provoke the same type of feelings and behaviour. Similarly using company or industry jargon may intimidate or mystify the customer who may not feel able to say they don't understand.

For front-line customer facing staff it can be all too easy to think 'I've heard it all before' when dealing with a complaint. Unfortunately this can stereotype the customer as 'a difficult one' or 'professional complainer'. These are indicators of a defensive strategy that polarise supplier and customer into opposing camps. De Board (1978) tells us these are social defence systems, which help individuals avoid feelings of anxiety, guilt and uncertainty. In reality any pain relief is likely to be short-lived, as most customers will react in return which can cause the situation to spiral out of control into an argument, to the dissatisfaction of both parties. (1)

management's involvement

Top management in most large commercial organisations have long espoused the value of customer care and their intentions to provide a quality service. In review meetings it is not uncommon to hear senior managers or directors lament the service their customers receive.

Invariably it is the perceived deliverers or front-line customer service staff that take the blame. Cries of 'What's happened to our staff these days... can't they think for themselves?' or 'you just can't get good people any more' can often mask management's own involvement in an organisational predicament that they both perpetuate and are victims of. From my work experience, this scenario is common in some of the top FTSE companies that are household names. It is particularly prevalent where mergers, take-overs and redundancies have eaten away at the relational fabric, culture and systems that provided the foundations from which the organisation derived its strength and reputation. In those companies both new and old staff cease to identify with the organisations' objectives, and instead pursue a path of self-interest and 'looking after number one'. Customer care then happens sporadically and largely at the discretion of isolated individuals. Egan (1994) describes this as the 'shadow side of an organisation'. Of course, these issues may never be openly acknowledged internally or externally, as they can be too threatening to deal with and risk damaging the 'perfect brand image' the organisation has built in the marketplace. (2)

However, for those working within the organisation or receiving a service from it the realities are apparent. Typical indicators of this condition internally are departmental politics, empire building, blaming others, withholding information from colleagues, and in extreme cases sabotaging company or colleagues' work. External impacts upon the customer can be broken agreements, missed deadlines, inferior quality products and services, lack of communication, and rudeness. There are psychological, social and

financial costs to be paid for by both individuals and company for allowing these factors to continue.

Even in established organisations, it's rare to find good customer care. I believe the majority of people have not been given the education that equips them to provide it. To truly serve another requires subjugating your own ego needs to theirs, albeit for a limited period in many customer transactions. This requires attention, discipline and compassion, apart from any skills relevant to the job. Whilst the eventual pay off can be a 'win-win' outcome, this is distinctly unfashionable in a society where many icons become successful through asserting their personalities, independence and a 'me-first' attitude.

Taking responsibility or ownership is also perceived as a threat by many as is engaging in any form of authentic communication that may make them feel vulnerable. Then customers receive a robotic response that only serves to irritate them more. To avoid this, effective customer service staff must have a degree of self-awareness achieved through personal development as well as professional development work such as communication and rapport building skills. Unfortunately, this need is often unrecognised by organisations that only supply technique-based training programmes.

This awareness and skill must be cultivated, monitored and managed at an organisational level if service levels are to rise. Clutterbuck, Clark and Armistead (1993) say that "managing every service encounter" is necessary to truly offer inspired customer care. This view may be known to many by Scandinavian Airlines' president, Jan Carlzon, who said "we have 50,000 moments of truth out there every day". He maintained that every single contact with the customer gave an opportunity to create an impression of the company. (3)

The Daily Telegraph on Customer Service (1999) recently quoted Sir Freddy Laker who endorses that stance. He is reported to have said "if the ashtrays on his planes weren't emptied regularly, his passengers would assume that the engines weren't serviced properly either". (4)

As a customer it is not unrealistic to make assumptions of this kind. Have you ever gone shopping for something only to find yourself being served (?) by someone with the visual impact of a zombie, who stares blankly at you and mumbles incoherently, while you try your best to make your needs understood? You make a purchase or arrange for a job to be done only to discover you were given the wrong goods or mistakes have been made.

where do you start?

Taking full responsibility for the service the organisation provides can often seem a daunting task for managers and change agents. It is important to keep your vision in mind, a sense of perspective and remember that people are genuinely interested in making a contribution, particularly when there is something in it for them.

However, in taking the first steps in a major initiative your client will understandably be nervous and unsure of where to begin. Assuming the organisation is already in existence, I suggest the following methods as a possible route:

- Auditing the organisation or the department(s) concerned. Find out what are their strengths, weaknesses and implications of shortfalls in customer care performance standards. Within the audit, test out the climate for change. Ascertain how will it be received. Who will support it, oppose it or sit on the fence. What are the issues and concerns the staff have and how may they be addressed.

- Define the customer service strategy. Use market research to define what the company should be offering its customers, do competitor analysis, analyse trends, review past and present images of the organisation as perceived by customers. Consider the commercial opportunities and how to position the company to maximise upon them.

- Review processes, procedures, skill sets and levels of staff empowerment. Design a training and communication programme that builds capability and informs the organisation about progress of the new initiative and achievement of service levels. Promote the company as a champion of customer care to staff and customers. Ensure a reinforcement programme is designed to transport new skills and attitudes back to the workplace. Managers must be seen to model the new behaviour they wish to cultivate on their staff.

- Provide on-going support. The new initiative will need on-going management support if is not to become 'flavour of the month' and go the way of past initiatives. Build-in rewards to reinforce new behaviour. Plan for and monitor gradual and sustained improvements over two to three years that allow the new service ethic, culture and skills to become fully integrated.

- Review related areas within the organisation, such as HR and recruitment. For example why battle with changing the attitudes and behaviour of staff with a poor customer orientation when you could recruit people with talent and aptitude for customer care.

conclusion

Managing the psychological and behavioural factors in providing excellent customer care can be achieved by those that have the courage, competence and commitment to do so. With customer care increasingly becoming the main differentiator between companies offering near identical products/services at similar prices, for those that do the rewards will be great. Those that don't, face an uncertain future.

references

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2. Egan, G (1994) Working the Shadow Side, Jossey Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

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4. The Daily Telegraph, Special Report, Customer Service May 11, 1999.

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