

The Customer Experience

Does good customer care cost money?

By Martin Molloy, European Customer Operations Director, Easynet



The best things in life are free, and when it comes to customer service this can be true - to an extent. Some of the most effective measures towards achieving outstanding customer service are also the simplest and most cost-effective. A reorganisation to make processes more efficient, and therefore make the customer experience smoother, can cost very little. Turning 'standard' customer service into truly exceptional customer service will require significant investment - but it's an investment which will pay for itself in terms of customer retention and new business won through reputation.

Smart spending

There's no point throwing money at the problem without a clear understanding of the complexities. Finding out where change - and therefore investment - is necessary and most beneficial requires an understanding of the business and, most importantly, your customers. A business audit will discover both where the problems lie as well as the opportunities for better performance. This involves asking your customers honestly what they think.

Do your staff put your customers first, or are they seen as an inconvenience? Are your staff being prevented from doing their jobs by inefficiency, poor systems or poor organisation? Do your business processes suit the customer as well as the business? If there are delays where do they originate - have you analysed the timeline? Remember that customers value efficiency above all else, as illustrated by a recent Easynet-commissioned YouGov survey of decision-makers within over 200 companies in each of seven European countries. It found that 49% put the delivery of goods and services on time and within budget as their number one customer-service priority, but only 47% reported receiving this regularly from their suppliers.

Once you've got a clear and honest picture of how you're doing, then you can determine where there are chances for improvement. Some problems may not be related to the customer service department. For example, if you're receiving a lot of calls to customer service, is it really wise to take on more people in this area? Or is it more efficient to invest in the areas that are generating problems - the cause, rather than the symptom?

A change in attitude

A company culture aligned to your customers' expectations is one of the most cost-effective ways to achieve customer satisfaction, and also the most likely to result in long-term success. But this doesn't happen overnight. And it cannot just involve people on the front-line - any culture change has to start with management.

Management needs to clarify the meaning of 'customer focus', and invest appropriately. So, from the start, achieving great customer service means understanding the customer before you've even won the business. This is something that continually needs to be emphasised - especially when you have a complex, intangible product or service. Whether you're providing a product or service or both, this means investing in customer experience programmes to source customer feedback at every opportunity. For example, there's no point investing in a complex voice recognition system if customers value speaking to another person. It also means investing in optimum solution design, based on customer needs.

Once you have the optimum solution, you need the optimum support. Investing in training is vital. This investment involves time as much as money. Your employees need to be taught best practice in regards to customer interaction. This can vary from answering the phone within two rings to major adjustments in attitude - always seeing the customer as the number one priority and always thinking of ways to go the extra mile to help. This is an area where you can really stand out. Very few companies go beyond what is expected of them, according to the Easynet survey. Only 6% said that their suppliers 'exceed expectations'.



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Educate staff in the wider issues. Staff need to understand your products and services but also understand the customers and their business objectives. Sometimes a relatively low financial value service component may in fact have a catastrophic impact on a customer's business if it fails. Equally, it's difficult for them to answer customer queries if the answers are always obscure to them. Take time out to give thorough training and maintain open lines of communication, so that frontline staff always know what's going on and can give truthful and realistic answers. Invest in market insight programmes, to educate your staff on their customers' sectors, and the markets in which they operate. Buy research papers, or pay for briefings from analysts for your sales teams. Invest in programmes which bring customers closer to all parts of the organisation.

All in the process

A change in attitude won't get you anywhere if your processes make it impossible for staff to do their job. If the customer is experiencing delays and mistakes then there's something wrong in the system. The Easynet YouGov survey shows that only 22% of respondents across Europe thought that their partners' supply chains were always efficient. The reasons for this can be varied. It could be that the business has grown too quickly and can't cope with demand, or it could be that your business workflows are badly designed. How you deal with these problems - and how much it will cost - depends on what's gone wrong. The problem could be fixed with a simple redistribution of resources, which may require no outlay at all, an investment in more staff or a one-off fee to a consultancy firm.

Or you may need to turn to technology. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems encompass both the strategy and technology that manages customer interactions so that all process - from sales to after care - become more efficient and more intelligent. All automated telephone systems are run by CRM software, for example, and this is something that can be outsourced to another company if the investment is too heavy to be handled in-house. If this is the case, make sure your provider can supply what you need. Are their CRM systems efficient? Is the call-centre multilingual if you have overseas customers? Will your customers feel short-changed if they're not dealing with you directly? Don't compromise your reputation for the sake of cost or efficiency.

Automation can remove a lot of pressure from your staff but be careful not to 'over-automate'. While customers are getting used to dealing with

automated systems - and some prefer it - many would still rather talk to a real person, so make sure that option is available. Good customer service is all about supplying the personal when needed. Only 19% of the 200 decision-makers surveyed by Easynet said that personal relationships have no place in business any more, and 54% said that companies today are more focused on profit than people. However, possibly the most telling statistic is that 62% named automated telephone systems as the most annoying factor contributing to bad customer service.

Not a cost, an opportunity

Modern CRM systems offer something new in customer service - the opportunity to understand your customers and personalise the experience even when you're dealing with a huge database of contacts. This may require a significant initial outlay in buying the software and working with the vendor, to design a system that suits your wider customer-service strategy and customer base. But the result will be a much greater understanding of your customers, and an opportunity to anticipate their needs.

You can, for example, spot buying patterns over time and adjust your products and services accordingly. But remember that technology is no substitute for human interaction. Software can't tell you what it's like emotionally to deal with your company. Software can help you spot your most loyal customers and how much they're spending with you, but then ask them why and what you could be doing better.

Finally - once your investment is paying off in terms of customer retention and satisfaction don't be slow to invest in communications to tell the whole world about it.



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