

# The Customer Experience

How do you create a culture that breeds good customer service?

Par Martin Molloy, directeur des opérations clientèle en Europe, Easynet



## The strategic importance of customer service

Why is customer service so important? Because when all other things are equal - and in many industries a lot of things are equal between competitors - customer service provides the best opportunity to outperform the competition. It's the most effective method of customer retention while customer advocacy is one of the most cost-effective methods of winning new business. And, put simply, those organisations that are not customer-driven will not succeed.

A reputation for fantastic customer service proves that a company doesn't just value its customers - it demonstrates that it has a sound organisational structure, integrated IT, motivated staff and a management with a firm grip on the company's direction.

The best customer service is informed by a company's wider values and its brand message and is reflected in every function of the organisation, in every country in which it operates. Commitment to customer service is reflected in the way the company behaves towards its customers at every possible opportunity. If a company prides itself on accessibility, responsiveness and a friendly approach, then it must live these values, giving customers access to the senior team should something go wrong. Customers forgive lapses in service, but their loyalty depends on the way issues are handled.

Understanding, communication and confidence are key to delivering an outstanding customer experience. But persuading staff to live these values in everything they do, and create a culture that delivers on its promises, can be a challenge. This is especially true for businesses with entrenched working methods and a history of focusing on other goals such as sales, output or attracting investment. It's crucial that the change involves the entire business. As consumers, we've all made a purchase only to be disappointed by after-sales care. In business, with larger investments and longer-term projects, ongoing customer care is key to a successful partnership and cannot stop after contracts have been signed. Customers will only have confidence in customer service if the experience is of a consistently high standard, from first contact to ongoing account management.

## Commitment begins at the top

Cultural change must come from the top. The message about good customer service has to come from the CEO, and it has to be openly declared, stated and restated wherever possible. The CEO should demonstrate his or her commitment to the customer experience by ensuring that the customer experience is reflected in the objectives of each and every member of staff. All employees' performances can be measured by, and rewarded on, customer

satisfaction. The commitment to a planned, deliberate and consistent customer experience has to come from the most senior levels in the company and should be reinforced by internal marketing and communication.

The organisation has to declare that customer satisfaction is its primary measure of success, over and above sales performance and profit. Measurable customer care targets should be set across the entire company, tracked as closely as possible and then linked to the overall levels of customer satisfaction. By taking the time to link operational performance to customer service, an organisation can give itself an accurate method of forecasting its success in customer satisfaction.

A company must feel that winning business is an opportunity to deliver an outstanding customer experience. Crucially, employees must understand the customer's business, objectives, competitors and market. Aligning functions such as billing, project management, sales and marketing with customer service can help deliver this if a company is dominant in certain business sectors. It must work with the customer as a strategic business partner and consider the customer an equal.

## Open lines of communication

Retaining open lines of communication with the customer - and within the company itself - is essential. This can be formal - customer advisory boards, progress updates, senior executive meetings, company meetings - and informal. The most successful organisations are those that make it easy for the customer to contact them, work with the customer and deliver exactly what is agreed every time. If your customer knows that they can speak to any level of senior management at any time, their confidence in you, as a partner, is immediately increased.



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## Investing in staff

Getting to the stage at which customer experience is intrinsic to the organisation requires investment in people. A defined, thorough recruitment programme will ensure the employment of people who will be the right cultural 'fit'.

Great customer service should be rewarded in terms of remuneration and promotion. The values that lead to good customer service, such as a proactive attitude towards helping customers, accessibility and responsiveness must be sought after and supported. It's important that an organisation allocates resources to each area of the business in realistic proportions. If your customer spends 10% of their lifecycle with you in sales, is 30% of staff in sales the right allocation? Simple resource modelling can reveal surprising imbalances in the way resources are allocated to customers.

## Empowering employees

Once these values are in place it will then be easier to allow staff to use their own initiative in helping customers. For example, if an employee goes beyond what is normally required to make the customer happy, they have to be confident that they will be supported and even rewarded for that action. All staff must be given the freedom to deliver great customer service. Many organisations say they empower their staff, but it is easier said than done. To really empower staff, an organisation has to provide tools which support staff in providing excellent customer experience. To simply employ 'good' people is not enough.

Senior management must be committed to providing staff with this toolset while becoming accustomed to seeing employees themselves as customers of the business. Managers need to ask staff what it is they need to perform, evaluate this objectively and then deliver it to the team, supported by effective training and processes. 'Tools' does not necessarily refer to the physical systems and processes but rather the means to fulfil the role. In some cases this can be as simple as confirming your support for a decision a member of staff has made.

Knowledge is vital to empowering teams. Specific training in customer service will not just increase employees' ability to deal with customers, but will show that the company cares enough to spend time and money on this area. Too often companies talk about their commitment to customer service but do not back this up with action and resources. Knowledge in other areas of the business is important. Localised knowledge and understanding of cultural differences is key to performing internationally. Staff that know everything about the product or service they provide will feel more passionately about their company and their role within it.

## The importance of communication...again

Finally, always ask the customer how you're doing - and ask again. The most successful companies constantly retain an open dialogue with their customers and know them as trusted business partners. If you haven't spoken to a customer today, are you doing your job?



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