



Deliver what your customers expect.

# How to inspire a marriage made in heaven

**If you are to fulfil customer expectations properly and deliver on the promise of the brands you offer, you may need to rethink your entire approach to customer service.**

by  
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**W**hen a business offers a brand to its customers, it extends them a promise that should be exciting, memorable and, most importantly, **deliverable**. Keep your promise, and you can have every expectation your customers will be delighted to commit themselves to you for as long as you continue to deliver.

The promise consists of the benefits the customers can expect the brand to bring them. The brand's advertising and marketing will enlarge on this promise, but the only dynamic that

will *deliver* the promise will be the customer's *real experience* of the brand. Key factors will be the brand's quality, consistency and the value for money customers perceive the brand as offering.

For many brands, the quality of the associated customer service will play a major role in delivering the brand's promise. In fast-moving consumer goods markets, the role of the customer service element in the brand is hardly significant. A chocolate bar, for example, does not come bundled up with any customer service, though a box of washing-powder might do, if there is a helpline number, or a website address. But in complex service offerings, areas such as financial services, hospitality, the motor industry, professional services and most areas of retail, the quality of the customer experience is a vital element, indeed probably the *decisive* element of delivering on the brand's promise.

## **The question that really matters**

The crucial question to ask yourself is: does the level of the customer experience we offer play a significant role in winning us competitive differentiation? If it does, then as a matter of sheer logic and commonsense, you need to focus on taking every step to maximise the quality of the customer experience you deliver with your brand.

Many organisations, aware of the importance of customer service, try to 'up the ante' by launching specific initiatives focusing on customer service. But experience suggests, and knowledge of human psychology tends to confirm, that such initiatives are not likely to be effective.

By definition, initiatives are conceived as separate, self-contained projects, and such projects tend to be vulnerable to indifference, inertia and to being discarded if trading

conditions worsen. Also, your staff may detect that the initiative is essentially a fad and not something they need to take too seriously.

Even the idea of an organisation having a customer service department might imply that the organisation thinks it can hive off the responsibility for serving the customer to a specialised department in the same way that it can delegate responsibility for functions such as transport, catering, human resources and so on. The organisation might be tempted to believe that it can solve its customer service challenge by adopting this 'silo' mentality and approach.

What really needs to happen is that all the organisation's departments must assess on a continuous basis how they impact on the customer and, if necessary, they must put changes in place. What must be avoided, above all, are conflicting priorities within departments that jeopardise the objective of consistently delivering superb service.

By all means, do let the customer service department manage the customer service operations, but don't allow yourself to fall into the trap of thinking that all the responsibility for delivering a competitively differentiated customer experience can be diverted to one department.

#### Why the holistic view is key

Instead, you need to take a much more holistic view, and strive to ensure that everyone at the organisation, and every functional department, are all working together in unison to deliver the same calibre and quality of service - a seamless service - just as a drop of wine in a bottle contributes to the overall experience of its flavour.

Adopting this approach to customer service is not just an altruistic act on the part of the organisation, there is a significant body of research that shows conclusively a close correlation between truly impressed customers and profitability.

#### Why merely *satisfying* customers is not enough

Note the use of the term 'truly impressed'. All the evidence suggests that organisations cannot confidently expect much commercial edge, or indeed any at all, from customers they merely satisfy. An organisation looking to win long-term loyalty and trust from a customer is in an analogous position to a suitor wooing a prospective lover. Would your highest romantic aspiration be to marry someone with whom you are merely 'satisfied'? Hardly. So why would you



expect your customers to feel differently when they consider whether to enter into a 'marriage' with an organisation's brand?

#### The two crucial requirements

Today, there are two major dimensions to the challenge of delivering a customer service experience that consistently impresses and differentiates a business.

Firstly, the organisation's senior management team need to see the customer service experience as the core of an organisation's being, and central to its business strategy. Not merely as an 'initiative', nor the

*Recruit, assess and reward staff on their devotion to customers.*

**"Offer customers an authentic experience that truly impresses them."**

responsibility of some specialised department. Directors and senior managers must be 'onboard' and 'on-brand': consistently and authentically committed to implementing the organisation's customer service strategy. They need to understand the implications of that strategy at a holistic level and to grasp its fit (or not) with other, perhaps longer-standing, strategies and commitments.

Indeed, any organisation that wishes to show that it is taking its customer service really seriously should consider

the ultimate test: that the organisation's senior executives are ready to link their salaries and bonuses to the positive impact their organisation has on the customers' experience.

Secondly, organisations must have the imagination and sincerity to view customer service principally from the perspective of the customer and the customer's needs, rather than purely from the point of view of the organisation's own requirements.

#### The danger of the 'CRM' mentality

Proof that many organisations often don't approach the customer with sincerity at all, and don't view customer service principally from the customer's point of view, is seen in the popularity of customer relationship management (CRM) systems. In many cases, calling the system a customer relationship management system at all is intellectually a trifle dishonest, because these systems tend to be programmed not to deliver a relationship to the customer but to maximise the opportunity to sell to them.

Whatever CRM system designers claim, technology alone cannot deliver sincerity, authenticity and genuine respect to customers. Only people can do that. Worst of all, too many CRM systems are delivered as essentially stand-alone technological solutions that are not intimately integrated with the organisation's customer service strategy and its people strategy. CRM solutions are hardly ever deployed holistically. They are a technological initiative.

#### Customer-facing staff

One practical measure an organisation can take is to introduce 'customer-facing' teams trained to deal with all customer requests. Organisations might balk at the investment and training necessary to achieve this objective but the increased customer loyalty, and a reduction in the volume of queries arising from customers who do not feel their needs were properly dealt with first time round, are likely to justify it many times over.

#### Other practical steps

Experience suggests that the following steps are the most important:

1. Analyse where your organisation is now in terms of excellence in delivering customer service and where it wants to be. In particular, look hard at what you think you are doing in terms of generating - again in an authentic and sincere

way - the right feelings in customers, so that you can truly impress them.

2. Directors and senior managers need to start working together, now, with a concerted purpose, to focus the whole organisation on making the customer experience central to what the organisation does. This activity should, above all, be directed at understanding the implications for the organisation of offering the calibre of customer service it wants to offer. The organisation may need to restructure so that it can present itself as customer-centric. The 'silo' mentality, where the organisation sees customer service as simply something handled by a specialist department that operates in splendid strategic isolation, must be avoided at all costs.

3. Think hard about, and focus intensely on, what have been described as 'moments of truth'. These are the particularly important touchpoints between your customers and your organisation where good service is likely to make an especially strong positive impact and, conversely, where bad service is likely to have an especially destructive or negative effect on the relationship.

Not only should you take every step to ensure that 'moments of truth' touchpoints offer your customers really positive



*Make sure the commercial 'marriage' lasts.*

*There is a close correlation between truly impressed customers and profitability.*

experiences, but you need to ensure that the quality of the experience is consistent across all touchpoints. A great experience the customer received in, say, a bank branch, will be completely squandered if the following day the same customer has a negative experience when talking to one of your call centre staff. And don't forget that it is unfortunately the case that we tend to remember bad experiences longer than we remember good ones. (Seven times longer, according to recent research.)

4. At a simple, elemental level, make sure you have staff in place who genuinely care about customers. The giant food retail chain Asda has a saying, 'recruit for attitude, train for skills'. You should in fact recruit, assess and reward staff as much on their devotion to customers as on factors such as the sales they generate and their productivity.

5. Take what steps are necessary to give all appropriate people at your organisation the tools to measure the beneficial effects of adopting a comprehensive, organisation-wide focus on customers. This may require you to develop tools for measuring, in a balanced way, the different impact various departments have on the customer relationship.

6. Remember you are ultimately seeking to win commercial benefits and financial pay-offs from your efforts to offer customers an authentic experience

that truly impresses them and encourages them to trust your organisation and win their long-term loyalty. You are ultimately seeking to induce your customers to enter with you into a commercial marriage. Success in achieving this aim is enormously important nowadays, when winning a new customer is more difficult and expensive than retaining an existing one.

When you make a decisive, sincere and authentic effort to turn your organisation into a holistic, comprehensively focused entity that is passionate about the quality of customer service it offers, you are reinventing and rediscovering why you are in business in the first place.

Ideally, you want your customers to make a commercial marriage with you, and for the honeymoon to last forever!



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