

Customer Care ... Setting New Quality Service Hurdles

By

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Background

At some point in our professional careers we have learned that customer service is the foundation of all retailing, a never-ending journey which separates the winners from the losers, the profitable companies from those that are non-profitable. The customer experience every time a customer touches a company in a branch or store on the telephone or Internet, through brochures and press releases, and especially when there is face-to-face contact, establishes a profound benchmark in their minds, which is used to judge other competitors or retailers. So everything a financial institution does must focus on the customer and put the customer first. As pointed out by the British Bankers' Association, financial services are unlike any other consumer product. When life-changing decisions are to be made, when major investments are planned or when financial difficulties arise, the bank has a crucial part to play. At times like these attentive, professional service is not just desirable it's a must.

Today, in most countries there is no significant difference amongst financial services providers in terms of quality of service. Many factors impact customers' judgements of service and there only has to be one element that negatively affect one's mind to rate poor service. Therefore, customer service has become the greatest challenge for financial service organizations. Companies that once only paid lip service to this core business driver are now investing massive resources into improving how they treat customers and measuring the customers' perceptions of those efforts.

Delivering excellent service takes an all-out effort involving all employees from the newest recruit to the CEO. Front line staff provide the crucial face-to-face customer contact, back office and head office staff must ensure the reliability of all touch points, managers need to motivate and reward employees and executives must be relentless in articulating service goals and "walking the talk".

A survey taken last year of 3,000 retail heads in the U.S. found that only pricing was more important than service in driving deposit growth, and that a quarter of the 15% of deposits that banks lose every year are because of service related issues.

The Power of Customer Care

In an article written for Cisco Systems entitled “Customer Care Cues from the Banking Sector”, Jill Griffin says “Get a 360-Degree Customer View. Providing outstanding customer care begins with developing a comprehensive view of the customer. How a customer is treated on a day-to-day basis is the real test of customer care.”

“Quality” has been the traditional word associated with the desired level of service. But, more recent research demonstrates the power and associated obligation with the word “care”. Without a doubt this is the level of service that brings the greatest emotion and potential for loyalty.

Caution: Using “care” in media or promotion copy of programs that are only rhetoric can create severe reputational damage. Consequently, positioning “care” is sensitive and a serious deliverable for an institution in its customer service commitment.

Some Examples of Organizations who are truly committed to Customer Care

Delta Airlines

On their website Delta Airlines says “We intend to ensure that your air travel experience will encompass, to the best of our abilities, the most comprehensive customer service possible.” They list their responsibilities and how they will fulfill them in 12 key points in an effort to provide passengers with a clear understanding of their commitment to customer care. These 12 points cover everything from “Before You Fly” to responding to complaints.

PNC Financial Services Group

Timothy Shack, CIO of PNC in Pittsburgh, says that he spends about a quarter of his time meeting with customers to determine their needs now and in the near future and that regardless of customer category, their strategy for success rests on three basic principles:

- Continual improvement of the experience with PNC
- Continual improvement of their product offerings
- Continual improvement of their infrastructure and security

The customer, he says, is at the centre of each of these principles.

Republic Bank Limited

Republic Bank, the largest bank in Trinidad & Tobago, has made a substantial customer care commitment and has developed a culture where everyone and everything they do is focused on truly differentiating themselves not only from their banking competitors but from all retailers. Their holistic approach is based on commitment, listening, personalized interaction, feedback and continuous improvement. A commitment to Service Excellence training across the bank is also contributing to a substantial shift in the culture of the Bank.

General Electric

GE says there are three key elements of quality: customer, process and employee, and everything they do to remain a world-class quality company focuses on these three essential elements:

- a) “The Customer – Delighting Customers: Customers are the centre of GE’s universe: they define quality. They expect performance, reliability, competitive prices, on-time delivery, service, clear and correct transaction processing and more. In every attribute that influences customer perception, we know that just being good is not enough. Delighting our customers is a necessity. Because if we don’t do it, someone else will!”

- b) “The Process – Outside-In Thinking: Quality requires us to look at our business from the customer’s perspective, not ours. In other words, we must look at our processes from the outside-in. By understanding the transaction lifecycle from the customer’s needs and processes we can discover what they are seeing and feeling. With this knowledge, we can identify areas where we can add significant value or improvement from their perspective.”

- c) “The Employee – Leadership Commitment: People create results. Involving all employees is essential to GE’s quality approach. GE is committed to providing opportunities and incentives for employees to focus their talents and energies on satisfying customers.”

The Customer Care Portfolio

Where Eagles Soar Inc. has developed a total bank Customer Care Portfolio to assist its clients who are taking customer service very seriously to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to set a new hurdle for relationship management within their market place. Financial services organizations in their personalized Customer Care Programs, will listen to customers and staff on how to continuously improve service; commit to their customers and each other a set of activities to demonstrate their focus and improve results for the customers, staff and the bank. Some key portfolio elements include:

- Satisfaction Research (External & Internal)
- Customer Care Centre (Centralized customer complaint escalation, resolution centre)
- Privacy Creed
- Listening Posts (Staff & Customers)
- Service Excellence Training
- Sharing Service Information & Ideas
- Public Staff Commitments
- Visible Actions of the Care Focus
- Instilling Flexibility & Empathy for Customers
- Recognition Initiatives (staff & customers)
- Improving Processes which Touch Customers

The Customer Care Portfolio is visible evidence of an organization's efforts on the quality of service journey. The components listed above are by no means all inclusive, exhaustive or closed. This is the beginning of the journey, not the end.

You want to listen and learn from new ideas not only from your customers, but from your greatest resource – your staff, who care for the customer franchise. This higher level of quality service is the customer catalyst for sales growth. In the end everyone wins – customers, staff and the bank. You want to practice and institutionalize “caring” in everything you do, together and with customers.

Do you really *CARE*?