

Customer service: is it a skill, attitude or process?

By leveraging the right attitudes and processes, you can deliver quality customer service that generates revenue.

By David Hand

Modern business has enshrined customer service at the pinnacle of its vision and mission. The reason is self-evident: it's customers who deliver the revenue a business needs to survive and grow. Despite this, customer service is a multidimensional concept, and people often mean different things when they use the word. Many companies see customer service in a qualitative way, as a market positioning where it wants customers to like it and post positive feedback on social media. For example, in the hospitality industry, many restaurants offer incentives to customers for a good rating on a website. But that begs the question, "Are we bribing our customers to say good things about us, or is our customer service good enough to earn plaudits anyway?"

In my view, the answer is somewhere in between. We work hard to deliver good customer service, but we know that they probably won't tell the world how good we are without a nudge from us. If our service is poor, these social media strategies can devalue the veracity of what we read, rather than convince us that the service is truly good.

At its heart, customer service is the outcome of an exchange. You want a litre of milk, you get the milk, you pay the store and you have received good customer service. Before we can think about our reputation, publicity, advertising, social media strategy, and good relationships with customers, we have to get our processes and delivery right, in alignment with customer needs. Without a customer-centric process, you don't have customer service. A customer-supplier relationship is best defined in terms of customer requirements, and these can be measured and tested. Customer requirements entail three measures:

1. **Quality:** You are after that litre of milk. It must not be beyond its use-by date — in fact you want the use-by date to be as far in the future as possible. You want your special needs met — fat content, A2 etc.
2. **Delivery or service:** you want the store to have it on the shelf.
3. **Price:** you are unwilling to pay \$50 for it and will go to another store if it's too expensive.

When we look at the product or service we provide, we should be able to define it in terms of quality, delivery, and price. In doing so, we can then define and organise our business processes to meet customer requirements.

We can also then justify requesting positive customer feedback on social media.

Approaching customer service as a process opens up other opportunities. One is the supply chain. Who do we rely on to enable us to provide good customer service? We now have a basis to discuss our requirements of them, which are in fact, an expression of the requirements our customers have of us. Internally within an organisation, this approach provides an excellent basis for service-level agreements. This is because any problem within the supply chain usually surfaces at the end, with the customer. Service-level agreements enable us to fix problems before they reach the customer, enhancing business performance throughout the process.

A second area is selecting customers: We are not obliged to meet their needs if we think their demands are too high. Tell the store you are only willing to pay 10 cents for your milk and they will decline to sell it to you. We have the opportunity to adjust our service using this method. This is why first class cabins are disappearing from many air routes — airlines are working out that we are unwilling to pay, and they are choosing not to supply the service. Fixing customer issues when things go wrong is vital. However, we must never lose sight of the fact that things can go wrong when we have failed to deliver good customer service. It's the prevention of customer service problems that delivers long-term success.