



Customer Care Is About Making A Difference...Not Just A Sale!

The buzz is out...every company will tell you that it's about the "*customer*", and that you can't make business work unless you understand what your customers need. If that's the case, if we really are customer-centered, then why are we still having problems with our customer relationships?

Part of the problem is that for most of us the customers are far away...so far away that we don't have an opportunity to make contact with them. In fact, most operations intentionally separate senior managers from the customer-contact point, placing junior or very junior associates in this position. This means that under-skilled team members are out front leading the charge to establish and maintain the customer base.

This isn't true for all organizations. One example of quality customer contact can be found at *Starbucks*, the national coffee house many of us have grown to love. Their belief is that managers at all levels need to get out and work the counter on a regular basis. Even their most senior executives spend time on the floor annually, ringing up sales while communicating with customers. The result...maintained connectivity to those who use the products and services they sell.

This concept is very powerful considering the competitive nature of the coffee trade; it is also valuable on many levels, allowing these managers to gain exposure on many planes. First, they are demonstrating that they are part of the process, bonding with subordinates and setting the bar through personal interactions with them. Second, this contact provides an opportunity to communicate and share corporate policy and vision, a process that does not filter lower than management level in most organizations. Third, and most importantly, the managers gain insight into who their customers are, and what they look for.

This connection to the workplace and resultant linkage to customers combine to offer management the opportunity to create improved customer relationships and truly make a difference, since they provide a creative vantage point from which to change and improve business strategies which, if done properly, will foster continued growth.

However, most organizations do not follow the *Starbucks* model. Generally, they fit into a more traditional model in which the higher a person moves on the organizational ladder, the further away he or she is from direct customer contact. To address an effective structure, we must reconsider the basics, and determine how to establish a form of continuous improvement within our approach to customers and focus on "making a difference, not just a sale".

In trying to evaluate the customer experience offered within our own organization, we must place ourselves in our customer's position. An easy way to do this is to consider the last time we were in a similar situation. Perhaps our customers connect with our team over the phone or via the Internet. When we submitted our questions or problems to a customer representative over the phone, what did we experience? Was it a meaningful and worthwhile interaction...and was our request handled satisfactorily?

Once we have gained the customer perspective, we must shift our focus to the organization. How does our program measure up? Are we on par, better, or worse than those we have personally experienced, either within or outside of our industry?

Maybe a more important question is, “Has our organization ever asked that question about our customer care process before?” Surprisingly, many organizations have not. Organizations build their processes and then simply assume their program is typical and that it is working. By failing to review their performance, they leave themselves open for problems, or worse... lost market share. What we find is that management is focused on the development of products and services, and not the customer connection. Because of this singular focus, they fail to realize that dissatisfied customers will normally walk away without commenting. Even worse, when they *do* comment, these customers are often faced with blank stares, hostile attitudes or at best, junior employees who don’t care and/or simply cannot influence company policy. This results in the loss of not only that customer’s future business but the business of everyone with whom he or she discusses this negative experience. Customer care is about making a difference...not just a sale...and if you are successful at this, throughout your entire organization, you will be the team that stands out from all others.

What companies need to assess is just how effective their process is, as well as whether or not it differs in anyway from the format used by their competition. One way to gain this knowledge is to conduct a *Benchmarking Exercise* focused on their industry. In doing this, you will review your competition, as well as yourself, and try to analyze both the good and bad aspects of the customer care process in use today. The purpose is to collect relevant information that will allow you to see where you stand and help you and your team improve the customer connection. As a result of Benchmarking, you will have improved insight into the needs of your customer population, accurate data about competitive practices, and tools to help your organization learn to make a difference.

Once you have mapped your industry norms and standards, you can begin the process of making your system the most effective it can be.

Sandy Geroux has been excited about improving customer care from the start. She effectively focuses on these issues at all client levels as she works to improve the customer connection achieved by her clients. Working with your team, Sandy can help you plan and execute your Customer Care Benchmarking project, and help your team analyze and evaluate the results. Then she can help you take your program forward to all levels of your organization through an effective *Customer Care Training Program* that will lead your organization to new levels of success.

For more information on Sandy’s Customer Care process, contact her today.

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