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How to achieve customer service excellence

Customer satisfaction is essential to build a successful business. Principal Consultant Amanda Green reveals how you can improve your service in a few easy steps

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What is your definition of service excellence?

There are three key things you need to do to achieve service excellence – effectively deal with customer queries, undertake these queries efficiently and competently and always meet customer expectations.

What are the secrets of good customer service?

When an organisation truly values the customer and engages its employees. You can

make employees feel valued and heard with a recognition system that drives good performance but remember recognition and reward comes in all sorts of different flavours. A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. You also need to encourage a culture where people don't mind learning new things or being told about gaps in their knowledge in a bid to continually drive good performance – an environment where assessments are welcomed rather than dreaded. But in order to encourage a sustainable performance you need to review continuously what your people do. Striving for a standard of excellence means being reviewed constantly, but in a positive way.

What is the root cause of poor customer service?

Disengaged staff, lack of appropriate training and people not truly understanding what they have been trained to do – but organisational culture plays a big part too. If there's an environment that doesn't encourage employee engagement then your staff are not going to feel motivated to do a good job. However, if you've got a culture that shows employees you're passionate about developing their understanding, confidence and knowledge, then engagement comes naturally.

What does an inadequate service cost an organisation?

Reputational damage. At the very minimum your customers are going to talk about their experience to others, but on the other end of the scale they may walk – either way it generates a lower customer satisfaction score. It also increases the likelihood of your customers going to competitors. Your processes need to be clear so staff know what they should and shouldn't do in any given situation.

What measures should be taken to ensure customer-focused service delivery?

You need to measure the level of understanding in your organisation to see if everyone knows what they should be doing, what the implications are of doing the wrong thing, and if they have the confidence to do the right thing. Measuring your team's communication skills is vital but these skills come in many different guises. However, you could use observation measures – where you put two people in role-play situations to watch and learn from it.

How can managers help people excel in their roles?

Managers have to be able to easily identify where individuals have knowledge and behavioural gaps, and be able to remedy those for each individual without having to effectively 'sheep-dip' everybody into the same training. There may be just one or two areas an individual needs to develop

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but as a manager you need to have some visibility or way of measuring the individual's capability. This is much more of a coaching/mentoring approach to management.

Why is it important to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to training?

If you can identify who needs what training, where, when and why, then you can appropriately assign your people to courses, and this has massive cost benefits. For example, you could put 10 people through a very brief assessment to see what they know and what they don't know, and then decide what learning or coaching each individual needs dependent on their level of ability. This is much more effective than putting everyone through the same 10-hour course. You're just wasting time, resource and money if you sheep-dip everybody into everything.

How do you embed a standard of excellence into a company culture?

You need to standardise training and processes and give clear messaging across the organisation – with clearly defined competencies of what is required of each individual (this can be set by role, division or department). You also need a central hub of information that can be accessed by everyone. It's a good development and competency management tool that helps to drive engagement and build a learning culture, resulting in excellent customer service.

You've worked with some big companies, such as John Lewis and Eurostar. Why are these organisations so good at getting customer service right?

John Lewis and Eurostar are prepared to invest the time and money to get it right. It is high on their strategic objectives and when it's coming from the top there's real effort being put into developing the right technologies, assessments and more. They also take it very seriously. These companies are not just saying they are good at customer service – they really want to prove it.

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