

CUSTOMER CARE TRAINING - BECAUSE WE CARE?



“Because we care....” The notice began “.our staff (the notice continued) will visit this Gentlemen’s W.C. on the hour, every hour, to inspect it and ensure that it is always in a condition in which you would want to find it.” Below this impressive piece of narrative there appeared the hours of the day and the initials of the staff member who had carried out this duty. The reader glanced at his watch, 1.20pm, sure enough every hour had been initialled so far that day.

This recent experience at a newly opened Country Club is just one example of the need of organisations to impress the customer, and draw attention to the fact. There are a number of reasons to do this, here are some:

1. Competition has scared many organisations into having to love the customer. The motivation for customer care is defence of the business.
2. If as an organisation you want to find your value added niche market, the chances are you will have to go up-market with your products and services. To do so you’d better make sure your staff change their behaviours as well. The motivation is achievement of the new corporate goal.
3. If you’ve always regarded yourself as being an expensive, quality contender in your market you’d better demonstrate that fact explicitly to your customers with real value for money. Facade and veneer are easily discerned these days and resented. The motivation is maintenance of margins.
4. Finally, as an organisation, you might have perceived one essential, core truth – businesses are only people; customers are people; and the only edge you will ever achieve is through your people. As your products begin to look much like everyone else’s your business success will increasingly depend on differentiated customer service, trust and long term relationships. The motivation is a desire to be different.

The first three reasons mentioned for implementing customer care training spring from extremely doubtful and usually short-term motivations. Their foundation is expediency. Only the last is worthy of recognition. Why?

Look at Customer Care Training motivated by the first three desires and you will find that the result is:

- **Cosmetic, contrived and unnatural employee behaviours.** – “ Good morning, P & S Retail, Anita speaking, how can I help you?” Who’s kidding who? Anita didn’t write, nor owns, this script. Her “singing” tone of voice is not hers. The end result is unnatural and distrusted.
- **Managers and supervisors with double standards who show customers one set of behaviours and their staff another.** The result of this inconsistency? Organisations which have to dictate and force customer care behaviours out of their staff, because the behaviours they are told to adopt are not being evidenced by their managers’ attitude towards them.
- **A picture that doesn’t add up.** You will see the credo or mission statement on the wall. The trouble is nobody understands it, believes in it, or practises it. How can a national tyre and exhaust replacement company be taken seriously when the tyre fitter, within view of such a customer care statement, overtly fails to fully tighten the wheel nuts on a car’s wheel, and only does so on the suggestion of the customer? Is there no place for competence and commitment before issuing customer care credos?
- **Lack of leadership.** Rush into customer care training and you will waste your money. Staff will only give their best to customers if the required values and attitudes are truly modelled by their managers as leaders. If there is no leadership, no vision, no measurable performance standard willingly agreed to by staff, forget it – the timing is wrong.
- **Lack of resources.** Promote customer care within your organisation without the equipment, materials, premises, systems, people, time, delegated authority or budget to deliver the required quality of service and you will fail – the resources aren’t there.

If Customer Care Training is to work, and it can work, then certain things need to happen. All involve the people issue.

RESEARCH AND DEFINITION.

Research is a must. It must be done to determine customer expectations within your industry sector. It all starts with the customer. Knowledge of competitor standards within your industry is also vital. Airlines often put their own “plants” on competitors’ flights to check out their service standards. Service is about quality, and *quality cannot be achieved unless it is defined and capable of being measured*. Best practice needs to be found and used.

MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT AND COMMITMENT.

Customer care must be addressed as a genuine and ongoing issue or it will not be taken seriously. Managers must confront and accept their leadership responsibility. *If staff are not treated as valuable individuals in their own right there is no chance that a change in customer care will occur.*

Organisations need to understand that their staff choose how to treat their customers. It is how their staff feel that matters above all else. Employees do not listen to what their managers say, they watch what they do – particularly TO THEM! If they are not living the message (modelling) and giving a high profile (signalling) to the priority of caring for individuals then their staff simply won’t buy-in to caring for customers long term.

FOCUS AND EXPRESSION.

The design of any customer care programme or concept must spring from the heart of the business. It needs to be given an identity and focus right from the top that is unique to the organisation. Customer care must be seen as a strategic part of the individual’s and the organisation’s future. People relate to image, vision and uniqueness. *The customer care vision needs to be expressed in language and image which allows staff to buy-in emotionally and be attracted to it.* They must feel a sense of personal pride and personal growth to be involved in it.

INVOLVEMENT AND CRITICAL MASS.

All employees must be involved in training. This stimulates healthy peer pressure toward new standards and provides a shared experience that encourages culture change. The best programmes go top to bottom. *Train managers on leadership in customer care as well as have them attend staff customer care training days.* A “serving” attitude needs to become part of the genetic make-up of the business. Cynics must be out numbered. Critical mass is all important. Expect your best to get better; your poor not to move at all; your average to get inspired by your best and become re-awakened.

PARTICIPATION AND STYLE.

Training must be highly participative and job-related. *You cannot teach customer care, you can only release it.* Programme design must be stimulating, challenging and enjoyable. People are not stupid. Most employees understand the commercial issues associated with service and simply need a non-threatening opportunity to buy in.

TRAINING AND FOLLOW-UP.

Customer Care Training should never be a one-off. *The concepts, attitude and skills need to be reinforced in an ongoing way.* This can be achieved through rewards programmes, competitions, open communication of successes, advanced training and ongoing localised team building around customer service issues.

EVALUATION AND REWARD.

There needs to be focused evaluation after the training process to determine if new attitudes, behaviours and skills are being evidenced. Methods of evaluation need to be designed and in place before the training. Post-training evaluation is vital. Mystery shopping follow-up, customer research surveys, and the organisation’s own quality control mechanisms are all vitally important measurement tools. *Successes must be rewarded.* Give more to your successful and the message will become clear.

SUMMARY

Superficial or ill-conceived customer care programmes born out of the wrong motive can be at least a disastrous experience, and at worst a negative marketing ploy which inoculates both customers and employees for life against the organisation.

Properly researched, designed, and structured customer care programmes vested in a corporate culture and leadership which reflects and lives the values, have enormous potential to release fresh corporate energy and put an organisation beyond the reach of its competitors.

On re-visiting the same Gentlemen’s W.C. of the same Country Club mentioned in the first paragraph at 4.30pm the same day the writer was dismayed to find no entries initialled after 2pm! *It just goes to show that customer care is as we all suspect – another broken promise. Nobody really cares at all – or do they?*