

Jump start

NOW IS THE TIME TO ACTIVATE YOUR BRAND

As the business environment gets tougher, it becomes increasingly important to develop a strong competitive advantage. **RUSSEL REHBOCK**, with input from Amanda Holt, unveils why we shouldn't overlook the obvious, or simplest, solution.

These are challenging times for all businesses in South Africa. As input costs escalate, it's becoming more and more difficult to pass these increases onto an already cash-strapped consumer. With less disposable income and more restricted access to credit, there is increased competition for business – and even more reason to develop a strong and resilient competitive advantage.

Pimp your logo

You can use a number of strategies to become more competitive, from pricing strategies to increased promotional campaigns. Yet, the ultimate strategy should offer a competitive advantage that becomes an enduring part of your brand value. You no doubt already have a strong corporate identity, so now is the time to cash in and turn the branding bling into branding soul. Real brand value, like all good

relationships, must outlast the first flush of physical attraction.

Don't miss the obvious

Across the South African business landscape there is one opportunity that stands out in all sectors – a singular need that very few are exploiting: the need for engaging customer service. The kind where the service provider is enthusiastic, informed and eager to help, where they actually listen and respond. The kind of service where employees can make decisions – and do. Where you can even find a degree of trust and comfort in the person satisfying your needs. Yes, engaging customer service is human, and in many respects intimate in its character – and it stands out.

This contrasts sharply with our daily customer service experience. For most organisations, customer service is a burden – something that must be perceived to be done. This perception is easy to create with a few well-designed and prominently-displayed charters, credos and customer service promises. No doubt these documents mean something, and no doubt they were generated with sincere thought, planning and intent.

The process of their generation was in all likelihood a long and costly consultative process. Unfortunately, it may have also resulted in a narrowing of focus – away from

truly servicing the needs and wants of the customer to following a prescribed process.

The result is scripted customer service where everyone is treated the same. In following the script, service becomes rehearsed, unenthusiastic, and remote. Ironically, both the service user and the service provider share this experience. The relationship is essentially hostile from the start.

Customer service is an attitude that is embedded in organisational culture. And although difficult to change there are successful strategies and techniques available to do it.

Competitive advantage

So, how is this competitive advantage and what's it got to do with my brand? Customer service is simply a way of describing the customers' experience – good service meets the customers' expectations, excellent service exceeds their expectations and poor service disappoints them. But, the real problem is indifferent service.

When a business projects the impression that they don't care through the attitude and behaviour of their employees, then the customer feels a natural resentment to doing business with you. We all know the signs of indifferent service – the flat tone, lack of eye contact

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and gum chewing. It is no secret that customers interact mostly directly with a brand through the people that represent it.

The customer's experience of your people therefore becomes their experience of your brand. Consequently, we need an organisational culture that encourages employees to understand their customers and their expectations.

In Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Blink*, he offers interesting observations gleaned from medical-insurance research. While many highly-skilled surgeons are frequently sued, many doctors who make mistakes never are. Further research reveals the reasons for this apparent anomaly – surgeons who'd never been sued spent an average of 3 minutes longer with each patient than

those who had been (18.3 minutes versus 15 minutes). In those extra 3 minutes, surgeons were more likely to orientate and explain to the patient, actively listen, laugh or be funny, and use a concerned and non-dominant tone. There was no difference in the amount or quality of the information, only in how they engaged and related to their patients.

Yet again, this proves that making people feel valued and respected is imperative in maintaining customers, and customer relationships ensure good business.

Customer service intelligence

Our experience has taught us that many conventional training courses are of little effect. They concentrate on shaping behaviour rather than attitudes. The effect seldom lasts, and old habits are hard to change. Most damaging are generic customer service courses that can, in no way, account for the needs and challenges unique to organisations and individuals. Good customer service doesn't need training, it needs intelligence.

For employees to provide engaging service, they must have a good understanding of themselves (personal intelligence). Personal intelligence allows employees to understand their own attitudes and responses to

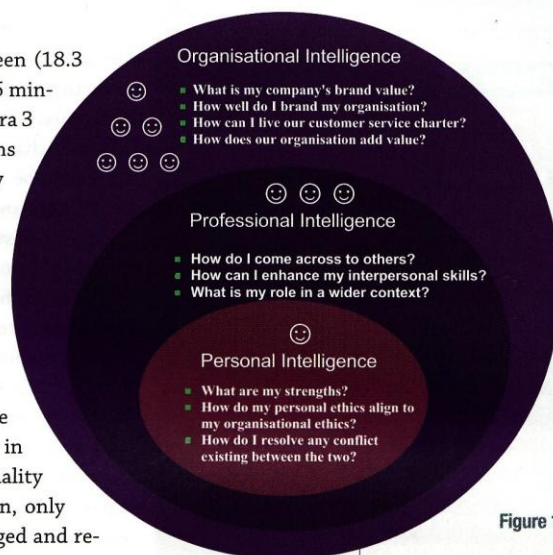


Figure 1

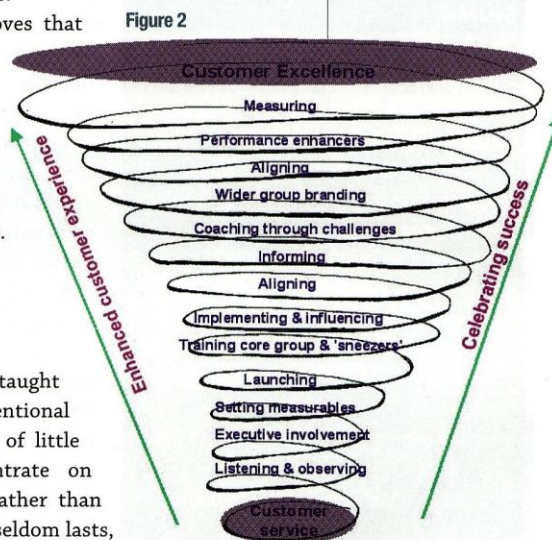


Figure 2

SIGNS THAT AN ORGANISATION IS 'IN CRISIS' WITH CUSTOMERS:

Attitude

1. Negative attitude towards customers
2. An 'us' and 'them' mentality

Climate

- many negative stories circulating about customers
- high stress levels
- negativity and low staff morale
- lack of public celebration of success stories

Roles

- uncertainty about the exact role and responsibilities of staff
- competitive divisions within the organisation
- high frequency of calls escalated to a higher authority
- unaware of how they offer an 'added value' to their customers

Systems

- organisation is more production focused than service focused
- a limited number of individuals deal with customer problems
- limited processes and organisational structures to deal effectively with customer service and complaints
- focus on quick turn-around time.
- no customer satisfaction survey system in place
- no service charter for the organisation (no service expectations or considerations to guide staff)
- service charter exists, but staff don't live its values
- emphasis on bottom-line results above all else

Response

- customers are not made to feel secure
- high frequency of customer complaints
- employees feel alienated from the client, the finished product, the purpose or the context
- quality of work not up to standard
- feedback is weak
- lack of repeat business

different situations. Are they defensive, insecure or angry? How do they feel about customers and their relationships with them? Through an understanding of their own attitudes and behaviour, employees are better equipped to communicate authentically with others.

They also need to understand what they do and how they fit into the organisational structure, what we call organisational intelligence. They must know who customers are and what specific needs and wants they expect to be satisfied. They need to understand their own brand and to affirm a personal interest in the brand promise. For instance, in one company, employees were avoiding 'difficult' customers because they had to enforce a sales strategy clause in their contracts which they didn't feel was wholly fair. Fortunately, the CEO, committed to the customer service drive, immediately agreed to hear their concerns, to enforce changes to address them and encouraged them to exercise personal discretion. This marked an important shift because employees were now an authentic part of their brand, able to define their brand promise in line with their own sensibilities.

Finally, employees should have professional intelligence. This includes a range of professional skills that are used in their communication and interaction with others – practical techniques for communicating electronically, in writing and orally.

Even these skills don't lend themselves to generic training because communication strategies are dependent on organisational culture. Every organisation must develop professional skills that reflect their own style. Traditional airline employees need to be more formal and conventional in their communication, as would be their style of dressing. They must be polite, but their tone must reassure passengers and customers on a number of levels. IT engineers are different. They need to engage and communicate on an appropriate technical level, but a more casual approach and style may work better.

Make the change

Our solution is based on a strategy – a series of well-considered interventions designed to start the organisation, and then to support it on the path to actually delivering on all

those strategically-presented promises and well-meaning intentions. A strategy that is designed to equip individuals and organisations with the intelligence necessary to deliver service that sets you apart from your competitors. And finally, one where the professional skills required and their standards must be generated by employees themselves.

Once you've made the decision to activate your brand you need to look to existing attitudes and behaviours. These measurements and observations provide a benchmark, and they inform the training design. By observing and listening, you may uncover unidentified issues that act as strong barriers to effective customer service. Once they're identified, they can usually be resolved simply, freeing up resources for real service.

At this stage, 'sneezers' (to borrow Seth

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Godin's word from The Purple Cow) are included in the initial process. They are carefully selected people and volunteers who will 'sneeze' the positive messages to others in the organisation, positively 'infecting' the organisational climate.

It's important to start raising awareness before the training starts, and then to launch the customer service campaign in an appropriate way, getting 'buy-in'. The strategy must however be sincere, and staff should not see it as 'yet another' publicity campaign.

Training must be personally engaging, and as experiential as possible. The training sets the tone for what's expected of your staff. If they find the training a drag, it's likely they'll find customer service the same.

Training should also not create undue stress on employees or your business functions. When staggered over a period of time, employees have space to start implementing their new techniques and attitudes between training sessions. This organic approach allows problems

MEASUREMENTS

What changes can you expect after effective service excellence training?

- attitudinal changes
- improved commitment to and energy in resolving issues
- staff empowered to deal with difficulties graciously and competently
- increased contact time with customer
- fewer "problem" clients
- decrease in problems escalated
- more compliments from customers
- quicker sign-off time
- clearer, more accurate feedback to internal and external customers
- more thorough records of contact, status and resolutions
- more satisfied customers
- increase in repeat business

to be addressed as they happen, and as employees become more conscious of what they are doing.

It's important, too, for workshops to include a cross section of employees attending together. This allows people from different contexts to share stories and experiences and generates organisational empathy. In addition, it almost always results in stronger internal relationships and networks.

For instance, in one instance, two groups of young and ambitious engineers were competing with their counterparts in another department. Their competition was considered healthy at the time, but it soon emerged that it resulted in long delays for the customer and duplicated costs for the business. This revelation also solved a host of related customer service issues. (model 2)

Addressing the issues

The customer service issues that people face are varied and best solved by those that face them. Workshops allow employees to share their challenges.

This sharing generates solutions, organisational intelligence and reduces the most common problems almost immediately. For example, in one instance we determined that most of the calls to an IT call centre were from employees who had forgotten their passwords.

Instead of their usual bored or irritated response, they decided to tackle this more proactively. In subsequent calls they resolved to take the time to explain how passwords work, why they are used and how to manage them.

It worked, and password resets dropped dramatically. Call centre management also learnt that it's more valuable to measure effectiveness of service by monitoring quality rather than the quantity of calls processed.

Supporting and measuring the process

Training alone doesn't shift attitudes, even if solutions and processes come from the employees themselves. The shift happens when there is consistent support and monitoring. Like a good advertising campaign, employees must be repeatedly reminded of customer service as product. Once again, this must not be some remote and institutionalised reminder, but one that recognises and celebrates successes and sets new goals.

As part of the support process departments and managers often design their own incentive and reward schemes. These schemes work especially well because they know best what motivates them. Support also offers opportunities to resolve sticky and persistent issues and to reinforce individual growth through coaching and assessment. Finally, the

shift in attitude must be measured, which, contrary to popular belief, can be done.

The bottom line

Activating your brand is a process of making your employees more aware. Through their interactions in developing a practical customer service approach, they generate and share the intellectual property that characterises your business. They become ambassadors of your brand.

If a sound strategy is used to activate the brand promise into actual service delivery, then internal customer service will improve dramatically. Once internal

processes are working with empathy, then external customer service will improve too. Employees can project their own experiences to external customers and understand the broader context of their behaviour and attitude. These shifts in attitude, behaviour and processes save money and time.

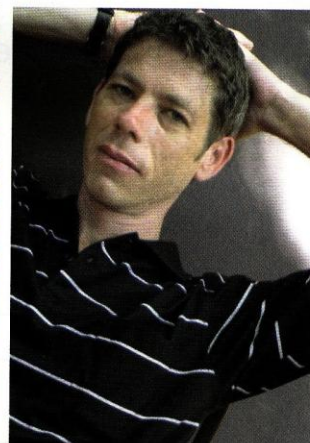
Through better customer service comes stronger relationships and customer loyalty, and a far more attractive return on marketing costs. It's an old, but true, cliché that it costs less to keep a customer than to attract a new one. **35**

► Why customers take their business elsewhere

- Indifferent service – 69%
- Poor product – 15%
- High costs – 14%
- Other – 2%



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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