

FORUM

The customer is king

'The customer is king!', 'The customer is always right especially when he is wrong!', 'If we do not take care of our customers, somebody else will!' Clichés such as these are easily coined but not as easily followed in practice. The Malta Business Weekly steps into the customer's shoes wondering whether with many local organisations customer care is more of a euphemism than a genuine belief?



Four jeans for the price of one but no four customers for the price of one.

Exceeding customers' expectations

"We will provide products and services that meet or exceed our customers' expectations."

The above extract from our corporate philosophy clearly depicts what we strive to achieve in terms of customer care. Through valuable feedback that our customer care section regularly receives from our esteemed clientele, it is possible for us to gain an insight into our operations - our services, our strengths, our weaknesses, our areas of improvement.

This feedback, whether positive or negative, is considered to be an opportunity for us to be in a position to enhance our services in line with our customers' expectations.

The emphasis currently clearly lies on quality service, especially in the airline industry. Through regular surveys we are able to identify, not only who our customers are, but also what their needs are. This then allows us to develop products/services that meet these needs accordingly, with the result that customer satisfaction is ensured.

Shirlee Zammit Munro

Assistant manager - customer care, Air Malta

Customer care, not all smiles

'The customer is king!' simply reflects the core idea of marketing with its focus on the customer. However, we all know that the implementation of the marketing concept is not without difficulty. Customer care and statements to the effect that 'the customer is always right especially when he is wrong' and 'if we do not take care of our customers somebody else will' concern some aspects of implementation.

Customer care owes its origin to the realisation of the critical importance of the contact moment for firms that principally offer a service product. It started in the early 1980s with Ian Carlzon, president of Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), who in seeking a competitive advantage over other airlines emphasised the importance of the contact occasions airline staff have with customers.

He called these contact occasions 'moments of truth' since they play a key role in determining customer satisfaction with a service. He was to launch a successful programme throughout the company highlighting the importance of ensuring positive moments of truth. This simple idea was followed by what are often referred to as customer care courses. This idea was followed by British Airways with their 'putting people first' programme, a process that led to a proliferation of many customer care courses. The 'we care' strap line currently in use with advertising by the national airline probably reflects this idea too.

Unfortunately customer expectations are not static and change over time. What was acceptable service a

few years ago is no longer acceptable today. Promising to care raises expectations significantly and despite increased levels of service this often results in poor levels of perceived service quality. Service quality, of which expectations and their management is a key element, is the construct which management should be concerned with. Customer care is not a marketing construct. These two alliterative words have been used and abused and one comes across a proliferation of customer care courses that offer anything from body language to 'smile school'. Not only that, but even complaints departments have been so labelled.

The concern for service quality is one of the consequences of the paradigm shift that has occurred in recent years in marketing. The discipline has moved away from a focus on transactions and the elements of the marketing mix, to a focus on relationships and a concern for service quality, internal marketing, and interactive marketing.

A firm that practices relationship marketing understands that the value of a customer lies not in buying its products once but repeatedly over time. Hence, 'the customer is always right especially when he is wrong!' Concentrating only on a single sale forfeits considerable earnings over time to the firm. The unsatisfied customer can often go elsewhere, hence 'if we do not take care of our customers, somebody else will!'

These remain euphemisms when the marketing concept is only paid lip service.

Albert Caruana

Head - Department of Marketing, University of Malta

Keeping them coming back for more

First of all, I most certainly do not subscribe to the 'the customer is always right especially when he is wrong!' cliché. However, from a supplier's point of view, I agree with the third cliché.

Competition is one of the best determining factors which create an environment in which the customer is most likely to receive good customer service and, in this context, 'Yes' the customer is king.

Regarding the second cliché I would go as far as to say that *bona fide* suppliers need to be protected from the customer who thinks he is always right even when he is wrong.

If such a customer is given an inch you can rest assured such a customer will demand a mile.

Suppliers who succumb to such customers create rods for their own backs and the only way they can endure the pain will invariably be at the expense of other customers. This is most unfair.

Although there are many local organisations which have fully grasped the 'customer care' concept there are too many who have not. There is too much lip service being paid to the concept with too little subscription.

Another problem, and this happens too often when big companies are involved, is when there is no dialogue between the people who come up with the slogans and the people who are supposed to deliver.

We must never forget that there are two main aspects of customer service.

These are the 'material' aspect and the 'personal' aspect. While bearing in mind that these days, from a material aspect, the difference between products of similar price ranges is rather minimal, in many cases, it is the

'personal' service that wins the customer and many customers do not even realise this.

To my mind customer care is about making the customer feel 'supreme'. It is about making the customer feel that his needs are the supplier's number one priority.

It is about ensuring that the customer is so satisfied with your service that he will come back and will recommend you to other customers.

This is where the importance of human resources comes in. Not enough importance is given to the selection and recruitment of staff, the development of staff, the simple basic matter of looking after staff, and the matter of creating an environment, complete with the right tools, in which they can give their best to the customer.

There is absolutely nothing complicated about it. Service industry employers must treat their staff in the same courteous, caring way they want them to treat their customers. Staff who are treated accordingly are more likely to feel good about themselves.

Employers should listen to their staff and make them feel that, no matter how little, they can have a say in determining policies and procedures. They must know that their employers are interested in what they have to say.

This will make them take more care in whatever they do. They are more likely to take pride in their work which they would do with a certain nice feeling.

They will feel good about themselves.

Consequently, as they deal with customers, they will inevitably transmit that 'good feeling' to the customer who will come back for more.

Adrian V. Muscat Inglott

Head - customer care, Department for Consumer Affairs

Decisions with a vision

We are an inherently aggressive race, and we are especially aggressive to one another. In contrast, good customer care requires the acceptance of criticism, sympathy, an understanding of a customer's needs, and above all, a smile and pleasant approach.

I would say that there are a very large number of local companies that do not give 'customer care' the importance and resources it deserves.

Up to now, most organisations in Malta have had it easy.

The consumer in Malta has so far put up with an unbelievably low standard of customer care and accepted it either through lack of an alternative place to take their custom (bulk buying, state monopolies, and so on) or because the competition's service is just as bad if not worse.

The increased and more aggressive competition created by a free market economy will certainly be the driving force behind a better understanding and execution of good customer relations.

Those organisations that will invest, or have already invested in the training of their staff in the techniques of good customer care will be the ones with an increasing market share.

A more demanding and selective consumer is currently being fashioned by a wider choice and will themselves determine the level of service they get in the future.

Business leaders with any vision are sure to have been working on this for some time.

Andrew Calascione

Managing director, Marks & Spencer (Malta)