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## Face up to reality

### ... and cast-off the age-old service myth

Does anyone out there remember Hollywood legend Danny Kaye singing about *The Emperor's New Clothes*? The song was based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale of a king fooled by two swindlers into believing they had sold him a smart new set of clothes that only he was clever enough to see.

In fact he was walking around naked. As his subjects were too scared to tell him the truth, they all went along with the façade by complimenting him on his fine new outfit. Until that is one small child, too young and naïve to be afraid, saw the king 'in the altogether' and blurted out the truth.

The myth was instantly and publicly dispelled forcing everyone, including the king, to face up to the awful truth.

This fantasy comes to mind when confronting one of the great myths of the 21st century: that 'service really matters'. Perhaps we should face up to the fact that, with a few notable exceptions, customer service is generally perceived by the public at large as mostly 'disservice'.

How can that be? After all, even in these troubled times, 'delivering great customer service' is a widely-expressed intention and big business in its own right.

Organisations loudly proclaim their ambition to 'delight their customers', to 'exceed their expectations' and, soaring even higher, to deliver 'a world-class experience'.

Customer service strategies are developed and honed at senior level and agencies put to work to create service visions, mission statements, brand values, core values and marketing campaigns that they believe will prove highly persuasive to their target customers.

Meanwhile, an ever-growing army of gurus excitedly and animatedly present the latest sure-fire ways to achieve and deliver service excellence.

So, like the king in the fairy tale, we have an industry that is convinced about its appearance – and believes it is making serious strides towards the delivery of customer service excellence. But if as customers we put ourselves in the position of that small child, what becomes obvious? There isn't much to shout about!

Think about your own everyday experiences. How many contact centres still have infuriatingly long-winded and cumbersome automated call handling systems? How many keep you waiting in a queue for interminable periods of time while informing you with mind-boggling nerve that your call is important to them?

How often have you:

- waited for attention in a showroom or store only to be completely ignored?

- wasted valuable time in a checkout or bank queue where only half of the available desks are manned?
- made the simplest request only to be told 'That's not possible, I'm afraid'?
- waited forever for a call to be transferred?
- been promised they'll call you back but they fail to do so?
- made a complaint only to be greeted with a surly response or even argued with?
- been misinformed or misled by staff and managers who don't know their own product or service well enough?
- been ignored by staff who would rather chat to each other than talk to you?

As the king might have said when he learned of his nakedness: *'How can this be happening?'* After all, many organisations seem to spend vast amounts of money and effort that, with some notable exceptions, have little real impact on the end user, the customer.

### **So, how can this be happening?**

It all comes down to where all that time and effort is spent. Because, despite all the strategic thinking, creativity and frequently major investment in new systems and processes, outstanding customer service is really about individuals doing simple things extremely well, often in difficult circumstances.

And it's the individuals at the sharp end, who are in direct contact with customers, who usually receive the least time, attention and investment.

However impressive an organisation's customer service offer, or laudable its vision and values, it boils down to what we, as customers, actually want. A few things come immediately to mind; I want:

- someone to acknowledge me, make positive contact and show they're genuinely pleased to see or talk to me – whatever pressure they are under themselves
- to feel confident that my questions will be answered – willingly and knowledgeably
- to feel confident that whatever problems I raise will be dealt with, proactively
- to know that, even if I'm in a bad mood, I will be dealt with professionally and politely
- to be assured that my right to complain will be recognised and welcomed and that I won't have to do all the thinking in difficult situations
- to know the person dealing with me will know exactly what they are talking about or what to do to find out
- to feel they can cope with the fact I'm having a bad day, that I have the right to be unreasonable but, with expert handling, can be won round
- to believe that, even though I'm battered and bruised from previous service encounters, I can be won over by competent professionalism.

For any ambitious service strategy to shine through at the sharp end, it must take into account the two most complex and challenging obstacles in its path – the customer-facing staff charged with its final delivery and, of course, the customers themselves.

Equipping people to deliver the strategy and meet individual customer needs requires huge reserves of skill, commitment and perseverance. To be anywhere near effective, it also demands planning, time and a significant proportion of the overall investment.

### **How can we go about it?**

First, recognise where the real issues and problems involved in delivering ‘great customer service’ strategies really exist – at the sharp end.

Second, acknowledge that customer-facing staff have difficult jobs in circumstances that can range from challenging to almost impossible. Indeed, many senior managers would find some roles extremely tough themselves.

Third, provide thorough briefings and rigorous training that are firmly grounded in the realities faced by staff every day. Excite them, by all means, with a new service vision, but showing respect for what they are being asked to do will pay dividends in the commitment and response offered in return.

Talking of respect, show it in the way staff are managed and communicated with at every opportunity. The link between management style and customer service delivery is unquestionable.

Finally, don’t encumber them with systems and processes that meet the organisation’s operational requirements to a tee but make the delivery of customer-friendly service almost impossible.

Perhaps facing up to reality will make this fairy tale come true.

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