

Publication: The Hindu Business Line
Date: Thursday, October 23, 2008
Edition: Chennai
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Are you being served?

Customer, an annual event which debates strategies for a customer-driven economy, concludes that an obsession to serve the customer will reap rich rewards in the long run.



Listen and respond to your customer's expectations

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Ever heard of James Wattana? A good bet you haven't but he was a former billiards champion from Thailand. Geet Sethi, an eight-time world billiards champion himself, likes to give the example of Wattana, nicknamed Thai-Phoon, to illustrate the power of concentration.

A championship final, Wattana, just 17 years old, is playing Jimmy White of the UK. The Thai is playing brilliantly and is leading seven frames to one, supremely confident. Suddenly his game drops a notch and before you know it White has stormed back to level with Wattana. In the last frame, Wattana just falls apart and White wins the championship 8-7.

Asked later what happened, Wattana said innocuously that his mind wandered to a particular street in Bangkok and of a £200,000 mansion he wanted to buy. "So, here he was, in the finals, but his mind was several thousand miles away. By the time he regained his focus it was too late," explains Sethi. A few years later, the same Wattana, readying for a final, is told just before he is to play that his father has been shot dead in Bangkok. Wattana goes on to play, all focus and concentration, emotions in check; he demolishes his opponent in one hour flat and then gives vent to his feelings.

"The mind is a funny thing, it has a mind of its own and needs control by constant training. At the moment of truth you need to be there, all concentration, like you need to be when you are with a customer," elaborates Sethi.

Sethi, a speaker at Custommerce, the fifth edition of an annual workshop on strategies for a customer-driven economy, was drawing from the world of sport to illustrate what one can do in organisational life. James Wattana, says Sethi, constantly reined in his mind. "You need to rein in your mind even when the pressure is on, even though you heard disturbing news; you need to serve your customer. Concentration can improve with constant habit," he says. That will define customer service from being a mediocre experience to a superlative one.

Moreover, it's not so much passion for a task but an obsession, "a burning desire" that will set firms apart, Sethi explains, giving the

example of former badminton champion Prakash Padukone who trained with obsession and whose focus made him the world champion in the early '80s.

So, how do Indian firms stack up when it comes to customer service, which, going by our own experience as consumers, most woefully lack? Dr Mrityunjay Athreya, management guru and mentor to Custommerce, says that today organisations are forced to sweat the small stuff, especially the training for frontline staff who deal with customers on a regular basis. "Very few do it voluntarily but when they see that if they don't do it they lose market share and margins and there is a survival threat. When they see good examples and see the results for themselves, they are encouraged to invest and stay committed."

Dr Athreya says the country has generally been behind global practices in most fields but has caught up in areas such as maintenance, productivity and quality, and now customer service's time has come. Small mom-and-pop stores in the country practise exemplary customer service, he says, but the large organisations get so mired in structure and bureaucratic practices that they lose focus. Organisations are training their staff in production and sales but not really investing in service-oriented training, but as consumers have higher spending power they are forcing service standards to improve. Management education in the country so far has focused on other aspects of organisations and not so much on the customer, but that is changing as well.

But he does say several organisations are catching up or excelling, especially in the service sector. "In the hotel industry chains such as Oberoi, Indian Hotels, ITC and Leela and smaller chains such as Kamat or Jet and Kingfisher in the airline industry, are outstanding in customer service," he says. Even state monopolies are improving. While service standards for the "class" customers have improved now it is beginning to improve for the mass as well. "I am optimistic that good training never goes waste so today the seeds are being sown for a customer service movement," elaborates Dr Athreya. Adds Ramanujam Sridhar, CEO, Brandcomm, "Troubled times call for greater focus on the customer. Perhaps the time has come for us to move from customer-centricity to customer obsession."

Sunny Rao, Managing Director, India & Asean, of Nuance India Pvt Ltd, a speech recognition software developer, insists that companies have lost the "connect" and take refuge in jargon and acronyms ranging from CRM, KMS and so on. "Technology is not going to solve what you want to or need to do; you can get it wrong with all the hi-tech you have," says Rao. A point Rao drums in is that customer service has to be open, inclusive and accessible. "It's value versus values - value of the commodity you sell and what values your organisation stands for which will make the difference," he emphasises.

Quoting management guru C.K. Prahalad, who said "experience is the brand", Rao says customers have to believe that your people are competent and well informed and empowered to take decisions. He outlines a few thumb rules: get the right attitude; treat your customers as you want to be treated; innovate - don't be mired in policy and procedure as many innovations come out of adaptation; nurture - act, listen and respond; guarantee - make it mean something to your customer. "All this is tough, but you have got to do it," avers Rao.

V. K. Madhav Mohan, Kochi-based management consultant, has some radical suggestions for companies to get more customer-centric. Provide the customer, he says, a seat on the company's Board. This will take the customer's voice throughout the organisation. "The CEO plays the most important role in the customer-centricity of the organisation; let the CEO's perception rating/ compensation be dependent on a

third-party customer satisfaction audit."

M. Mahadevan, Director, Oriental Cuisines Pvt Ltd, and a speaker at Custommerce, knows a thing or two about customer service, considering that he runs over a 100 restaurants and bakeries in 18 countries and works with 126 partners and employs 4,000 people. His outfit runs the Hot Breads chain of bakeries and a string of restaurants from Benjarong to Zara's bars. "I've always judged my customers well; I followed the Indian immigration trail to the US and other countries and set up restaurants there which cater to their tastes," he says.

Mahadevan keeps it simple with his ground rules: Give the customer what he wants; din it into employees that the customer is always right; sell what the customer needs, not what you want to sell; accommodate the customer at any cost; don't take a customer for granted; top management/ CEO should interact with customers and lastly, "You sell your service to the customer, not yourself; keep your dignity intact," he exhorts.

G. Shankaran Nair, President, Corporate Strategy, Servion Global Solutions, which has conceived and played midwife to Custommerce for the past few years, says there are important takeaways to be had from an interaction on different facets of customer service. "We learnt that in order to remain in touch with the customer at all times, it is necessary to be flexible enough to be able to follow her wants closely and map your offering to those wants."

K. Balakrishnan, Managing Director and CEO, Servion, says that while the company is a specialist in customer interaction management technology and process, the challenge is to bring sanity into the whole process of automation as companies which are scaling up look to interactive systems to manage customer interface. "Companies are looking to cut costs and are looking at automation to do that but how you make it user-friendly and give consumers access to people in an organisation is key. Customer expectations are high but it's getting more expensive to create more customer service touchpoints."

Those are questions that organisations will continue to grapple with. And, as Nuance's Sunny Rao says, customer service is like dating; you've got build those relationships slowly!