

Customer service in the right spirit

At Customerce, the focus was on the people behind customer relationship management, not on the technology.

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When Scott Munro got a marketing call from his telecom company the third day in a row at dinner time despite his requests not to be disturbed, he told the caller he could take action about it, because weren't there rules against such disturbances? You're right, said the caller, it's illegal to call a prospect but not a customer, and as you're already our customer for the telephone service, we're playing by the book when we call you to sell our other services.

Talk about doing things in the right spirit – Munro, Vice-president (CRM Product Management), CDC Software, narrated this experience during his presentation at the seventh Customerce National Convention held last week in Chennai. Munro, and all the speakers at the convention, underlined one thing: Having customer management software only puts you on a par with other companies, it's the human touch that gives you the edge – so enable your employees to reach out to customers and take steps to set things right and delight them.

BIGGER, NOT BETTER

Munro referred to ACSI (American Customer Satisfaction Index) findings that proved that as companies got bigger, their customer satisfaction ratings went lower. The focus is on acquisitions and mergers but not on customer service. Companies have to "eat their own dog food" to understand how their products and services are affecting the customer, he said. "Customer experience is not part of the business, it is the business," he stated.

UNFORGIVING AND VIRAL

In his presentation on 'Customer Service Trends and Contact Centre Strategy', Francois Lancois, President - Asia-Pacific, Avaya, a company that specialises in business communication, said company research showed that for 92 per cent of customers, the first impression of the company is the contact centre. Seventy-three per cent of Generation



Karambir Singh Kang, General Manager of the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower hotel when it was attacked by terrorists in November 2008, went to great lengths to help trapped guests at great personal cost – the death of his wife and two sons who were also in the hotel and could not escape. PAUL NORONHA

Y were people who would switch companies after a single bad experience, and 85 per cent of them would share it with their pals, a disaster in these days of social media, when it could go viral within no time. He also said 40 per cent of global customers preferred to interact with the company through means other than customer service centres, and that they are most open to social networking sites as a contact channel. He quoted a Gartner study which predicts that by 2013, 80 per cent of businesses will suffer revenue losses from not offering Web-based support on mobile devices. Experience management is the next-generation differentiator, he said.

Speaking on the delivery part of customer experience (CX), Lori Bocklund, Founder & President of Strategic Contact Inc, said a company should provide effective and consistent user interfaces. Allow customers to use many channels, and be mobile, proactive and social. "Consider all channels in your customer experience. However, find the most appropriate channel that suits your business," she said, pointing out that a phone

call may not always be the right channel; the Web is a great one – provided your customers use it; email may offer limited opportunities – but it's not real-time; chat and collaboration can aid some Web activities, but not all, as we are early in the social media and mobile maturity cycle.

CULTURE OVER TECHNOLOGY

When the Taj at Mumbai was besieged by terrorists in November 2008, the concern hotel employees showed for the guests is a poignant example of customer service with a human touch, said Prakash Shukla, Senior Vice-President (Technology) and Chief Information Officer, The Indian Hotels Company Ltd. The hotel lost several staff members during that attack – of over 40 people who were killed, only 11 were guests, he said.

"Customer service is about culture rather than technology, there needs to be some pride in what one does," Shukla said, adding that at his company, employees are empowered to go the extra mile to help make

guests comfortable – and that includes solving "non-Taj problems", such as help with personal devices and medicines.

A factor that is as important as customer service is employee engagement, Shukla said. How happy and engaged are your employees? If that is true, they'll go above and beyond the call of duty, which has a great effect on customer service, he said.

"Technology is fine, but only to keep you in the game. You won't be at a competitive disadvantage, but having it doesn't confer an advantage either," he added. In fact, one aspect of it is how stagnant data (phone numbers, addresses, preferences) can harm customer service rather than help its cause.

Romnie Battista, Executive Director, Account Strategy of the US-based MISI company, which provides experience design consulting services, said it was important to know one's customer. "Know thy user, thou art not thy user," he emphasised, adding that it's not the company's job to think for him but to ask.

Battista spoke from the perspective of "Creating a customer experience strategy." "Remember, each customer is your ultimate boss. And you can fire you," he said, adding that a true CX programme should not be a side-priority initiative. It must be an internal and fundamental change to how you do go-to-market.

The role of employees is vital for a successful CX programme. Understand the key touch points where your customers interact with your business. There are always two sides to every interaction that takes place, and the employee side is always a critical CX component. Your employees must know what customers expect, what is required of them and why they value your brand. They must want to provide that experience on a continuing basis, and they must be able to deliver the experience both in terms of skill and empowerment.

And finally, the experience of both customers and employees must be aligned to the business goals. "It's not all that easy. It's hard work, be prepared for many bumps and bruises along the way," he cautioned.