

High-end mobile subscribers get faster customer service!

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(From right) Mr Khong Bee, Head, Customer Service, Great Eastern; Mr S. Ramaswamy, Head, Service Quality, Idea Cellular; Mr Avron Barr, business consultant; and Mr Suresh Shankar, Management Member, RedPill Solutions, at a seminar in Agra on Friday. - Ramesh Sharma

As a customer of some telecom or banking service provider, imagine having to pay more to ensure that you get to speak to a customer care executive faster than others when you call them up for some problem.

Interestingly, that has already started happening here - high-end customers wait for less time when they call up customer care centre compared to low-end customers.

In the mobile telecom service segment, for example, with the prepaid ARPUs hitting unusually low levels, the cost of providing agent-based call centre support to the low-end customers was proving to be higher than the cost of service itself, said experts at Custommerce 2005.

Custommerce is a forum dedicated for customer-centricity where industry experts converged to generate insights into various facets of customer interaction.

As the cost of providing after-sales service support to retail customers in services industry moves up, companies need to increasingly move towards variable paid service support, said Mr Suresh V. Shankar, Managing Member, RedPill Solutions.

RedPill is a Singapore-based consulting firm that operates in the customer service space. When a SIM card costs Rs 200-300 per month, from a company perspective providing agent-based call centre services proves to be more expensive than the cost of the SIM card itself, he added.

Mr S. Ramaswamy, Head (Services Quality), Idea Cellular, said that the company internally identifies and groups its customers on the basis of their monthly usage charges on a quarterly basis.

"Internally, we categorise our customers into four segments.

Whenever the high-end customer calls, he gets to speak to the customer care representative within a few seconds."

Officials from other leading private telecom service providers said that they follow similar practices as well.

Big role for SMS

In this backdrop, there's a need to incentivise people to migrate towards cheaper methods of servicing customers, such as short message services (SMS), they added.

"SMS would emerge as the next big interface between companies and customers," said Mr Khong Bee, Head of Customer Service at Great Eastern, a Singapore-based insurance firm.

He added that customers could be given incentives to migrate to a relatively cheaper interface.

For example, the company could announce some lucky draws for people who send e-mails or SMS for their queries, he said.

According to a recent study on the Asia Pacific market, 86 per cent of the consumers considered speech-enabled IVR a satisfactory alternative to 24-hour live agent customer service, Mr Bee said.

"On August 3, we were the first insurance company in Singapore to launch a voice-activated IVR to meet changing customer lifestyle, and our retention rate moved up from 25 per cent to 40 per cent," he added.