

Sellers beware! When improved customer care equals improved margins...

The Hindu Business Line | 23 February, 2007

Chennai, Feb. 23: T.R. Gopalakrishnan recently dropped the nearly Rs. 1,000 worth of stuff he had picked up at a premier health and beauty products outlet in Chennai and walked out because he was picking up chocolates a sales assistant asked him if he would like to try out their latest tummy trimming equipment. "I am sensitive about my weight. Her snigger as she asked me didn't help either," he says. "A shopping expedition for me is therapy and exercise, besides getting what I need," says Ruma, a mother of two from Kolkatta. "So, when I am looking at something I hate to be interrupted by salespeople asking if I want to look at something else. It irritates me no end."

In a word, what often makes customers walk away from a store without buying anything and swearing never to return is the simple but often underrated concept of customer service. "Customer service has to be a very important element of any company's marketing strategy. The quality of the service must give the customer an 'experience' of satisfaction, and even delight. This is possible only if the customer needs are met; problems solved and queries answered. The service staff should recognize customers and be aware of their likes, dislikes and even shopping habits," says Dr. M.B. Athreya, management specialist and mentor of Custommerce, a forum dedicated to customer centricity.

Businesses in India have always understood its importance but now they aim to achieve new margins with improved customer care.

The term Custommerce was conceptualized during three annual conferences hosted by Servion Global Solutions over the past three years. Attended by above 250 senior executives from the Asia Pacific region, West Asia and India, they were a mix of customer support heads, and marketing and IT personnel.

Custommerce aims to create wider awareness in companies to help them improve their CIM (customer interaction management systems) and build a customer centric culture. As Dr. Athreya says, "India must have a more customer driven economy, which will be a national competitive advantage in the global arena."

An expert panel consisting of academics and practitioners from different sectors with experience in customer relationship management (CRM) has been formed to provide strategic guidance. Among its objectives are creating a CIM movement that always keeps the customer in focus, functioning as a think tank to drive best and 'next' practices in CIM for the Indian industry, evolving a self-assessment and governance mechanism for CIM practices and setting benchmarks. "A more customer-oriented industrial sector of India should bring more men and women into the market, to use their rising per capita disposable incomes with greater satisfaction," Dr. Athreya says.

And it's easy to agree with him when he says, "In principle, every segment of our society should improve its CS (customer service). Just as the industry should become customer-centric, the government and NGOs should become people-centric. At present, the banking, financial services and the telecom sectors are being highly receptive and have been early adopters of CIM."

Contact www.custommerce.org for more info.