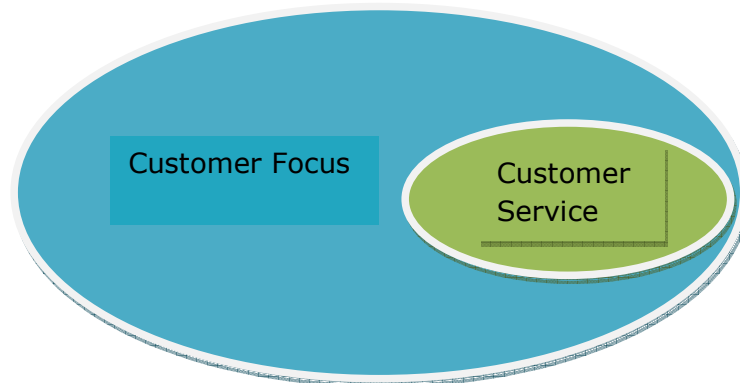


Is Customer Service Customer Focus? Discuss!

We speak to many companies about their ambition to be “customer focused”, put “customers at the heart of the business”, be “customer led”, the “customer experience” and so on. Probing further it becomes apparent that there is a need to get beyond what used to be called plain old “customer service”. Often the most successful organisations, and those known for a great customer experience are businesses that are more recent start ups and in my view this begins to give a clue as to why many large organisations never progress beyond “customer service” initiatives when what they need is a major culture shift.

So what is the difference? Becoming customer focussed goes beyond improving the experience for customers at a transactional level. It implies an attitude, a mindset and way of doing things that is predicated on retaining customers, building relationships, adding value, caring about satisfaction and meeting expectations at a much deeper level.

Bog standard customer service courses usually boil down to being polite, treating people with respect at the level of meeting and greeting them or transacting with them in person or on the telephone. Don’t get me wrong, there may be a place for that based on my own experience as a customer and much could be done to improve on that score for many shops and service businesses. Unfortunately, what often happens is that the business will opt for a quick fix approach by putting everyone on a telephone skills course or similar because they simply can’t get “torn face Tessa/Tommy” to smile or answer the phone properly. The real question is does spending money on that make a difference to customers? – unlikely isn’t it? Why? Because the reason Tessa/Tommy answer the phone that way is probably nothing to do with their knowledge or techniques– so what else is happening?



Failure to acknowledge and address an organisation's underlying culture and the role of employees who manage customers means that ambitions to deliver a high level of customer experience will usually fail. The whole customer experience is built on an integrated approach to customer management which involves how the company does business – that is how it communicates, supports customers, sells to them, provides services and after care and how it supports, deploys, trains, manages and rewards its employees.

An Australian colleague Steve Simpson has a relatively simple definition of culture which we have adopted – “it’s the way we do things around here”. This refers not to what the corporate brochure and induction course tells new recruits but more likely it is the much more subtle and realistic impression they gain after a few months in the job. Unfortunately, the typically senior managers who often sponsor service initiatives are either somewhat removed from this underlying culture (by dint of their distance from the frontline) or in some instances perhaps even in denial! Steve refers to “underlying ground rules” and quotes examples like: “around here the people who speak up in meetings get more to do”. Sound familiar?

However you choose to define culture then for sure changing it has to address a number of areas that impact upon it including: staff skills and behaviours, processes, data and information use, the physical environment in which staff work and operate with customers, the social norms, attitudes, communication, recognition and reward and management style. Even job titles can have an impact on how people behave and the prevailing culture. Arguably, however, the single most important factor in achieving a winning customer culture is evident, appropriate and strong leadership behaviour. We have addressed this issue before see - “Being Customer Centric”, “Living Up to Your brand Values” and “If Your Culture Stinks, Blame it on the CEO” for starters. You can find them on our website along with previous NUGGETS articles, papers and reading material. Or email us and we’ll call you to discuss it. We’ll even give you feedback about your culture when we try!

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