

Building a relationship

If you are to fulfil customer expectations properly and deliver on the promise of the brands you offer, you may need to rethink your entire approach to customer service, says Lyn Etherington of Cape Consulting

WHEN a business offers a brand to its customers it extends them a promise that should be exciting, memorable – and, most importantly, deliverable. Keep your promise, and you can have every expectation your customers will be delighted to commit themselves to you for as long as you continue to deliver.

For many brands, the quality of the associated customer service will play a major role in delivering the brand's promise. In fast-moving consumer goods (fmcg) mar-

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kets the role of the customer service element in the brand is hardly significant. A chocolate bar, for example, does not come bundled up with any customer service, though a box of washing-powder might do, if there is a helpline number, or a website

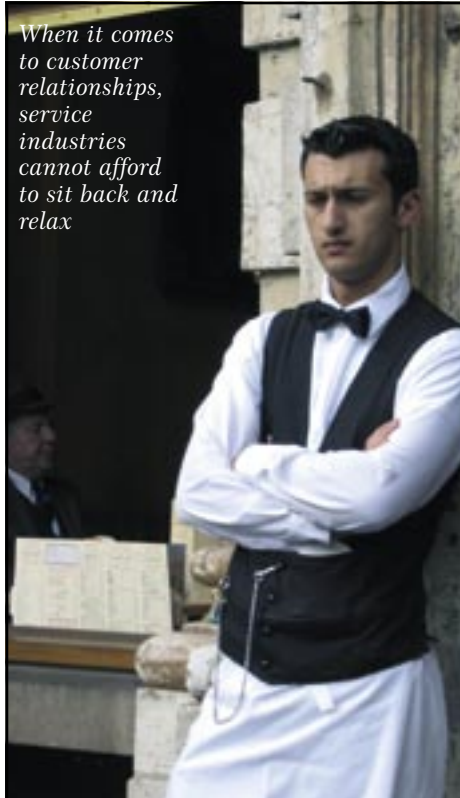
address, on the box. But in complex service offerings – areas such as financial services, hospitality, the motor industry, professional services and most areas of retail – the quality of the customer experience is a vital element, indeed probably the decisive element of delivering on the brand's promise.

Today, there are two major dimensions to the challenge of delivering a customer service experience that consistently impresses and so differentiates a business.

Firstly, the organisation's board and senior management team need to see the customer service experience as the core of an organisation's being, and central to its business strategy, not merely as an 'initiative' nor the responsibility of some specialised department. Directors and senior managers must be 'onboard' and 'on-brand': consistently and authentically committed to implementing the organisation's customer service strategy. They need to understand the implications of that strategy at an holistic level, and to grasp its fit (or not) with other, perhaps longer-standing, strategies and commitments.

Indeed, any organisation that wishes to show that it is taking its customer service really seriously should consider the ultimate test of an organisation's commitment to its customers – and to the long-term commercial benefits this commitment brings. This is that the organisation's senior executives are ready to link their salaries and bonuses to the positive impact their organisation has on the customers' experience.

Secondly, organisations must have the



When it comes to customer relationships, service industries cannot afford to sit back and relax

imagination and sincerity to view customer service principally from the perspective of the customer and the customer's needs rather than purely from the point of view of the organisation's own requirements.

Proof that many – perhaps most – organ-

isations often don't approach the customer with sincerity at all, and don't view customer service principally from the customer's point of view, is seen in the popularity of customer relationship management (CRM) systems. In many cases, calling the system a customer relationship management system at all is intellectually a trifle dishonest, because these systems tend to be programmed not to deliver a relationship to the customer but to maximise the opportunity to sell to them.

Whatever CRM systems designers claim, technology alone cannot deliver sincerity, authenticity and genuine respect to customers. Only people can do that. Worst of all, too many CRM systems are delivered as essentially stand-alone technological solutions that aren't intimately integrated with the organisation's customer service strategy and its people strategy. CRM solutions are hardly ever deployed holistically. They are, in most cases, simply a technological initiative.

When you make a decisive, sincere and authentic effort to turn your organisation into a holistic, comprehensively-focused entity that is passionate about the quality of customer service it offers, you are re-inventing – and re-discovering – precisely why you are in business in the first place.

Ideally, you want your customers to make a commercial marriage with you, and for the honeymoon to last forever!

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