

CUSTOMER RELATIONS

Your customers want to love you, just as long as you're sincere about meeting their needs – so make it easy for them • By Sionade Robinson.



It isn't easy being loyal today. The complexity and competitiveness of the modern world means that there is an unprecedented quantity of offerings out there. Whether it's loyalty to employers, shops, brands or to the organisations that compete for our business, the sheer breadth, range and number of opportunities can be intoxicating.

But the truth is, we want to be loyal. We know how complex, chaotic and ultimately indifferent the world is to us and to our hopes, dreams and ambitions. We want to belong; we want to feel that the people and organisations to which we give our loyalty really care about us and our personal needs. We expect a good deal, but we are usually prepared to make a modest trade-off of the quality of the deal in order to stay with the organisation that we love and which we feel loves us.

We are complex emotional creatures. And the more complex, sophisticated, and bewildering the world becomes in the range of options on offer, the more willing we are to offer affec-

tion and loyalty to organisations from which we detect a sincere, reciprocal affection.

Some hard-nosed and bottom line-orientated business people may regard these observations as too touchy-feely and subjective for their taste. But if you really want your bottom line to improve, and if you want your organisation – and your own career – to attain the heights that will fulfil your dreams, then ignore the psychology of your customers at your peril.

The organisations that really want success now and in the future are taking on board the following crucially important beliefs, acting on them with passion, energy and creativity:

- the responsibility for maximising customer loyalty sits fairly and squarely with the chief executive officer;
- winning and maintaining customer loyalty deserves the same kind of attention that is lavished on such issues as stock price, cashflow and regulatory compliance;
- customer loyalty should have a fundamental, dynamic effect on every element of an

organisation's business operations: it drives business success and therefore chief executives' careers;

- consistently high customer retention from loyalty can create tremendous competitive advantage, boost employee morale, produce fundamental bonuses in productivity and growth, and even reduce the cost of capital; and
- conversely, organisations from which customers persistently defect will soon find that these defecting customers will outnumber the organisation's loyal advocates and may even dominate the collective voice of the marketplace. If this occurs, no amount of advertising, public relations or clever marketing will be likely to save the organisation's reputation.

So what practical measures can be taken? Loyalty derives straightforwardly and entirely from a service experience that customers enjoy. But it is essential that the customer service experience is coherent, and harmonised with the organisation's culture and strategy.

Organisations cannot expect to maximise customer loyalty unless they are sincere about it. If they are not, they are going to be found out, and probably sooner rather than later. There is a simple but momentous logical sequence that links quality of customer service with generation of customer loyalty and profitability: customers who are impressed with the service they experience from an organisation are likely to give it repeat business indefinitely and enthusiastically recommend it to their relatives, friends, business contacts and anyone else who matters in their lives. This fundamental point connects customer service quality with commercial performance.

Cape Consulting's work over the past ten years has identified a range of crucially important behaviours which, if exhibited sincerely and consistently by an organisation, are likely to have an enormously beneficial impact on customers' perceptions and consequent loyalty.

We call these behaviours Key Relationship Builders (KRBs). In a call centre, for example, if staff consistently and regularly deliver the KRBs, customer ratings of service increase significantly. We have identified such KRBs. They are best analysed in terms of the gratification they offer customers. Three of the most important have been found to be:

- customers get the opportunity to ask any questions they want to ask;
- customers feel that the agent listened carefully to what they had to say; and
- customers feel they were given time.

Our experience is that the way for organisations to win the customer loyalty war is to focus on these KRBs and ensure that they are being delivered daily. This is an attainable goal, and can cause revolutionary improvements in the quality of customer service. Even better, in the vast majority of cases these improvements can be achieved without a single penny needing to be spent on capital investment. ■

● *Sionade Robinson is a consultant with customer service specialist Cape Consulting (01784 417 900; sionaderobinson@capeconsulting.com; www.capeconsulting.com).*