

Caring for Customers

On a recent family holiday we decided to try a restaurant (not in Cairns) that proudly proclaimed to serve the best Thai food in Australia – a grand boast perhaps, but you can't help but admire a bit of conviction and honest belief in self promotion. As it turned out, the food was excellent, and there may very well be some merit in the claim. Full marks to the chef!



But that's where the good news ended, as the absence of any real sense of customer service or care really let the side down. A long list of issues, individually inconsequential, but collectively significant, detracted from the overall experience. The end result was that our view of the restaurant was not as favourable as it could, and should, have been. I was left with the feeling that here was another business which, in spite of itself, will probably manage to subsist, yet disappointingly will almost definitely fail to realise potential. This, simply from a lack of attention and customer care.

Thinking on it later, I realised that this anecdote is symptomatic of far more broad reaching attitudinal changes towards business orientation and customer management, and surprisingly that is that customers no longer matter (individually).

In the past, the individual customer was a prize to be respected and valued, and (within reason) all efforts were focused on ascertaining and meeting that customer's needs. It seems that businesses (of all sizes) are now increasingly concentrating on standardised service delivery, with diminishing levels of personalised care, interest or attention.

Customer care is a buzz phrase that has emerged in recent years, particularly amongst mass market retailers, and refers to management of all points of customer interface; from initial enquiry to account connection, from point of sale to invoicing and debt collection. The naming is ironic. One would expect the word "care" to imply a sense of personalised "I care" type attention, trying to satisfy individual needs. Quite the opposite is the case. Customer care is all about acquisition and retention of mass numbers of customers; it is not about individual customers.

We have increasingly moved to a "lowest common denominator" consumer society where God help you if your particular enquiry is not catered for in the numbered options on the recorded message. Marketing is significantly focused at pricing keenness, rather than quality and service. Margins therefore have to be recovered from cost savings. Personalised care and attention is expensive and therefore infrequently now an option. More and more, customers are having to modify their needs to fit the selection of prepackaged "solutions". The tail is now well and truly wagging the dog!

But there is a flip side to all of this, and it is a matter of some significance. Customer loyalty, something once highly prized and valued, is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Recognising that their supplier has no particular personal attachment or relationship with them, customers are responding in kind. Just look at the mobility of banking customers these days. There is a sad irony in the fact that bankers were being re-badged as "relationship" managers at the same time that banks were actively moving away from any personal relationships with their customers, or any genuine care for, or interest in,

their businesses. When did your “relationship” manager last call to enquire how your business is going?

Perhaps big business can afford to be cavalier about loss of customer loyalty and increasing customer mobility; but small business cannot. Indeed small business should recognise the niche opportunities that are increasingly being left in the wake of desensitised larger businesses, and respond to the fact that people will usually be prepared to reward genuine care and attention.

There is an old adage that it is far easier to generate additional sales to an existing customer than it is to gain a new customer. Another is that there is no better advertisement than a referral from a satisfied customer. I believe these sayings still have currency, and recommend that you continue to examine how your business might better care for your customers.

Cheers

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