

Towards a better customer service future:

Five practical tips

THE PERSPECTIVE SERIES

New insights into the UK workplace

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The customer service challenge

You're telling us that most customers – whether you run a large or small business, are more demanding than ever. They're armed with more information than they've ever had before. They communicate and share that information through rapidly expanding social media communities. They also have more options, more choice, and their expectations of the service you provide are rising all the time.

At the same time, it's probable that the budgets you have available to improve your customer service are dwindling. Or will at least stay the same. So if you do really want to improve, two major questions arise:

- on the one hand, how do you make best use of limited resources to deliver the best possible service today?
- on the other, how do you invest wisely to adapt to rapidly changing customer behaviour – while also making sure you keep a long term grip on the basics that really matter to your customers?

It's a conundrum that faces organisations of all sizes. But with planning, one that you can start to solve...

Tip 1

Stay focused on the basics

A lot of talk today is about 'connected' consumers. Both large and small businesses are likely to respond with more and more emphasis on social and digital communication. As our research shows, however, the vast majority of people still want to communicate by phone, email or in person. So make sure your customers are always able to contact you on their terms. For most businesses this will mean keeping these core elements as the bedrock of a progressive multi-channel strategy. [Have a limited capacity to take calls? see point 3 below]

Tip 2

It seems obvious, but ask your customers' for feedback

Above all customers want their issues resolved satisfactorily. Companies that do this well know their customers inside and out. They solve problems successfully because they know what both delights and irritates their customers at every single stage of their journey. To help you achieve this goal, it's well worth considering investing more of your time gathering detailed customer feedback. Large businesses can consider new systems that gather real time feedback via interactions on mobile phones, for example. Small businesses can compete by gathering feedback and intelligence via social media.

Tip 3

Use social media to do more with less

In customer service terms, social media is often talked about as a new channel that will need to be implemented to address new demand. It can also help you understand what your customers feel about you. But could it also help you drive new efficiencies? Used as part of your overall service mix, social media has great potential to bring cut costs within your customer service operation: for example, by diverting some people away from your phone lines. If you run a small business you can consider taking this a step further, using social media to build an in depth customer service capability that will help you work around your limited capacity to take calls.

Tip 4

Do what you can to break down walls

Great customer service is carried out by individuals who feel like they have full responsibility for resolving issues. Organisations that do it will also make sure each individual is focused on the customer experience. Equally, great customer service is characterised by a seamless experience regardless of whether it's delivered in a shop, on a PC or on the phone. Consider how you're going to do this better by breaking down the barriers that exist within your company. Can you do more to help staff share knowledge and insight? Job shadowing across departments or areas of the business might be a good start. Making sure managers spend time on customer service issues is even better.

Tip 5

Take it one step at a time, and set those expectations

Whether you are thinking about adding new channels like social media right now, or simply have them on the to-do list, the key thing to remember is to take it one step at a time. The social media world in particular is very accepting of experimentation. Make a small start, gather feedback along the way and refine your efforts as you move forward. And remember, just like your stores or your phone lines, social media doesn't necessarily have to be 24/7. It's ok to set expectations. Some of the biggest companies in the world confine their social media customer service to office opening hours. If that's the way you prefer it, it's ok for you to do so too.

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