

## **Customer Service Management into the future**

Customer service management will become increasingly important in South Africa as consumers begin to expect better service and become better able, through greater economic prosperity and easier access to technology, to exercise their choice between competing service providers. As a result, the scope of customer service management is likely to expand, to include defining and designing organisations from the outside in, with the customer playing a central role in the business. Therefore, we should expect the position of Customer Service Manager to acquire greater significance within the organisation as time goes by.

Customer expectations are being shaped by exposure to new and best practices and wider experience of competing / similar services. Customer satisfaction surveys are increasingly returning the same findings, i.e. that customers expect greater choice; ease of access; convenience; security; reliability; efficiency; respect and appreciation for their situation, and above all – speedy resolution of their requests and enquiries.

As a result, the South African business community's mindset with regard to customer service management has begun to change, with executives becoming more inclined to invest in enabling technologies. However, the networks, hardware and applications alone will not be sufficient. Organisations must also be prepared to invest in their data environments and data management capabilities such as data architecture, data warehousing and analytics, as the ability to implement customer strategies in the various channels through multi-channel applications will be critical as we move forward.

Jay Galbraith writes in his book entitled "Designing the Customer-Centric Organization" that "In order to be a successful and viable firm in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a company must have a customer-centric capability". Further, he asserts that nobody owns the customer today; it is the customer who owns you, an assertion that Andy Searle cannot fault. But, what does having a customer-centric capability require of an organisation?

Firstly, the organisation must get to know its customers, by asking questions such as "Who are they?"; "Where do they live?"; "What are their physical and emotional wants and needs?"; "How will these needs change over time?"; "What are their preferences?"; "What are their character profiles and typical behaviours?", and "How are these behaviours likely to be affected by time and by changes in their environment?"

Secondly, the organisation needs to design (or redesign) itself from the outside in. That is, it needs to consider where and how the customer will access it; how the customer will be treated; how he / she will experience each touch-point in the service delivery process, and how service requests will be executed. This last factor implies that organisations must configure themselves with people and technologies centered on their customer-service processes, in order to meet or exceed their customers' expectations, at the same time as they create value for the business.

Thus, staff will have to be better trained than they are today, and must be enabled to execute their roles in the customer management process. They will also have to be profiled more precisely against both the types of services provided and the customer segments being serviced in order to perform their roles properly. This could entail them having a certain amount of life experience, a certain educational background, and a

thorough understanding and / or experience of the products and services being supported.

Furthermore, the customer-centric organisation will have to equip its people with the skills to be sensitive; to show empathy; to exercise sound judgment; to listen and hear; to interpret information, and to connect the dots between different types of information.

In addition, performance management, reward and recognition, and incentives will have to be aligned to the service objectives of the business. Branding and the branded service culture will become very important, and staff will be expected to live the brand of the business in every interaction with the customer.

Providing services cost-effectively, matching offerings to changing life-cycle needs, and managing the customer's experience, will drive profitability in the future, as will cross-selling, on-selling, and loyalty. Customers are not profitable when products and services are incorrectly matched to their needs or incorrectly packaged and priced; nor are they profitable when their changing life-cycle needs are not identified in time and exploited fully. Instead, they will chop and change between service providers, looking for "the best deal", as there is little incentive to remain loyal to an organisation that does not supply what they want when there are other, better, more competitive options available.

Failure to have clear customer strategies; the lack of suitably skilled people; inaccessible, inaccurate and irrelevant information about customers, and poor (or no) integration of front- and back-offices and channels will seriously inhibit customer service, as will poor knowledge of customers, poor planning and poor execution.

The key message of this article is clear: **"Get to know your customers better than ever before and start orienting your business around them, before it's too late."** In the process, consider the value of the customer management role within your organisation, and design it in such a manner that your customers and business are (and will remain) inextricably linked, so that both the business and the Customer Service Manager are enabled to deliver on the organisation's value proposition.