

CONTACT PROFESSIONAL™

March/April 2007

www.contactprofessional.com

Essential information for today's contact center leaders

Waking Up to the Changing Expectations of Your Customers

BY SHARON DANIELS

As customers become increasingly savvy, products more commoditized and choices more abundant, organizations are finding that creating customer loyalty is harder now than ever before. With new technologies, demographic shifts and the rise of enhanced customer experiences, buyers' expectations are changing. Simply meeting those expectations or satisfying the customer doesn't automatically translate into repeat business.

Indeed, among customers who switch to a competitor, as many as 80 percent report being satisfied before making the move. It's not unusual for a customer to count on access to service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

As technological advances continue, customer expectations for customization and round-the-clock service will expand, in terms of what products and services can be customized and the level of service that can be handled 24/7.

Implications of New Technologies

Without question, technology has dramatically altered customer expectations. Today's customers expect organizations

to know about their last service call and how it was handled, along with any number of other details that can ensure a smooth transaction. As such, customer relationship management tools are becoming even more important for growing organizations. Companies often find themselves asking, "How can we leverage this new technology to better serve the customer? And when we do, will that change the way we train our customer service agents?"

move. It's when customers feel loyal to an organization that they behave in ways that help grow the business. Consider the example of a customer who contacts a bank's call center with a billing issue. The customer already expects to have his or her business needs – the practical reason for the call – satisfied. If a customer service representative answers the call promptly and successfully addresses the issue, that interaction does little to inspire loyalty. The customer called the contact center expecting that the situation would be resolved. Meeting that expectation won't guarantee the customer will choose to continue using that bank in the future.

Fortunately, the foundational principles of customer service remain the same. For example, the need to address cus-

tomers' human and business needs or the need to create positive defining moments to build loyalty don't go away simply because a company has implemented new service-related technology. Companies should avoid falling into the trap of believing that human skills are unnecessary because technology will fill the gap. While technology can enhance the customer experience, organizations still must create customer-friendly processes and provide employees who have exceptional sales and service skills. Agents must not be so focused on using technology that they are unable

tee the customer will choose to continue using that bank in the future. Some of the most significant changes in expectations center on customization and the absolute availability of service. With quicker turnaround in production and equipment to make one-off products, customers have come to have even higher expectations about buying and experiencing products and services developed just for them. What's more, the proliferation of Web sites and the ability to do many types of transactions around the clock have led customers to expect organizations to provide longer service hours. (Continued on page 42)

to interact with customers on a human level, or forget to apply key interpersonal skills that can have a great impact on the customer's behavior.

For instance, an agent on a call who is still learning how to use new software cannot let it impede his or her ability to be attentive to the customer. It is important to remember that although the context has changed for putting soft skills into action, the skills themselves are still the same.

Another change brought about by advances in technology is a new breed of highly educated customers, who often know more than the call center agent. They research products and services and often reference the company's Web site

The need to address customers' human and business needs or the need to create positive defining moments to build loyalty don't go away simply because a company has implemented new service-related technology.

while speaking to the agent. With this in mind, organizations must arm their agents with the organizational and product knowledge that will allow them to deliver the kind of service experience that exceeds the customers' expectations.

The Changing Face of Customers

Like technological change, demographic shifts also are impacting how customers expect their needs to be met, and how companies are approaching their customers. Organizations are spending more resources on identifying their target markets and testing new ideas with them before launching new products and services. This requires a whole new level of knowledge about these target markets and what and who impacts the decision-making process of their buyers.

For example, Generation X and the Millennials don't just expect to buy goods and services. These two groups are interested in the complete customer ex-

perience – how they feel when they do business with a company. It's incumbent upon organizations to adjust to these changing expectations but without losing sight of the fact that ultimately, the foundational principles of providing good service haven't changed. The baseline of providing excellent customer service should remain the priority.

What Customers Want

With the lip service paid to customer loyalty in today's marketplace, it would seem to be a given that organizations understand the value of a loyal customer base. However, few companies manage to serve customers in the ways those customers would like. The challenge lies in human nature and the ability of service providers to develop the right attitudes and supporting behaviors.

To deliver service performance that inspires customer loyalty, organizations must first understand what customers really want from a service transaction. This has remained constant, even as new technologies arise or customer demographics shift. Research has shown that, regardless of industry, product, age, gender or location in the world, consumers want the following four qualities:

1.) Seamless: A service provider must be able to manage service factors that are behind the scenes and invisible to the customer, sparing customers the need to deal with multiple organizational layers or complicated procedures.

For example, when customers call a bank's call center with questions about their billing statement, they don't want to be transferred from department to department, or to repeat basic information for every new voice on the other end of the phone. They expect the initial service provider to coordinate everything for them.

2.) Trustworthy: Customers want to feel that they are in capable hands, and that a company will keep its promises. They also want and expect things to be correct the first time. Should something go amiss, they expect a quick and thorough recovery.

In the case of the bank, the customer wants assurance that the new options offered by the service representative are available as promised and will be reflected on next month's bill.

3.) Attentive: Customers want to be

recognized quickly, politely and with respect. Although this may seem like the foundation of customer service, attentive service – the quality valued most highly by some customers – tends to be the point at which many organizations fall short. We know from our own experience that if someone tells a story about being ignored by a customer service representative, listeners often respond with their own "horror stories," each worse than the one before.

4.) Resourceful: Providers who take a fast, flexible approach to the service interaction appeal to customers' desire for resourceful service. If needed, customers also expect prompt and creative problem solving in the service recovery.

For example, that bank customer wants the service provider to be able to suggest other options that would alleviate the billing issue. If the solution offered isn't reflected on the next billing statement, that customer expects the provider to fix the problem quickly and without complication.

Successful service providers learn to assess each customer's service expectations and adjust their approach according to that person's predispositions. Some customers like simplistic chitchat, while others prefer business transactions with only limited personal interaction. While finding the balance is not easy, it is essential to creating the positive defining moments that inspire customer loyalty.

For example, if the agent from the bank solves the billing issue, but is also friendly, behaves professionally and takes the time to detail a different set of options that would avoid the problem in the future, that interaction exceeds the customer's expectations, makes an impression and increases the likelihood that the customer will continue doing business with the company.

Final Thoughts

While it is important to recognize customers' changing expectations, it's equally important to stay connected to the foundation of providing good service. Companies that instill the right customer service attitudes and behaviors into their workplace culture and daily practices will be well positioned to improve customer loyalty, drive business growth and ultimately achieve and maintain a leadership position in the marketplace. CP