

<http://www.mycustomer.com/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=132935&u=pnd&m=phnd#>  
13/04/2007

**From the Customer Management Community -  
www.insightexec.com  
Don't miss the train**

**By Louise Druce, staff writer**

Every business should be striving to provide good customer service. But there is also the holy grail of an exceptional experience that customers will remember and recommend - and aiming for such a target demands more than basic introductory training for frontline staff.

"It is no longer about simply answering the telephone correctly or remaining calm and polite in heated situations," says Kasmin Cooney, managing director or learning and development consultancy Righttrack. "Customer service is about developing an inspirational culture that captures the imagination." Or what she calls a "holistic visitor experience" approach.

That means staff having an understanding of the importance of what they are doing, why they are doing it and actually believing and buying into the brand they represent and the service they are providing, rather than going through the prompted motions for every enquiry or sale.

Righttrack sees the best method of drilling this message into new recruits as through face-to-face training that encompasses skills provision and role play, often combined with e-learning refresher programmes four to six weeks after the initial course. As staff advance, classroom-based delivery is combined with an experiential element mirroring the client organisation to start a mind and culture shift.

But Cooney believes training can only be truly beneficial if employees are able to transfer what they have learnt in a meaningful and effective way, which involves post-programme support. Righttrack, for example, provides its clients with access to more programme materials, contact with trainers, a personal learning log and a dedicated message forum.

"Client companies' service levels always improve following training, with the change dependent on their level prior to the training. For example, companies starting out on their customer service journey find their complaint levels fall as customer service representatives hone their basic skill set," explains Cooney. "As companies advance in their level of service provision, extended training often results in improved customer satisfaction levels as the focus changes from purely customer service to embracing the whole visitor experience."

**In their shoes**

If you've ever had to sit through a long-winded training session with endless PowerPoint presentations and a person at the front preaching about how to do your job, you'll appreciate how easy it is to drift off and start thinking about what you're going to have for dinner rather than being engaged with the service or product you're trying to convince customers to invest in. The best training allows employees to put the theory into practice and think for themselves.

Specialist PR evaluation company Metrica had already invested heavily in the development of its staff but because of the nature of the business, external training always tended to focus on transferable skills like time management and client liaison.

It needed a way to equip employees with the ability to handle important business situations before they found themselves thrown into them for the first time, especially when it came to pitching clients.

Learning and development consultancy LDL came up with a programme whereby Metrica's junior employees stepped into the role of account director for the day and met with a trainer posing as a prospective client to find out their needs. They then had to come up with a convincing pitch presentation to win the account. Each presentation was filmed and the group was given feedback on their performance.

Louise Burwood, Metrica's client services director, believes it gave participants the opportunity to absorb lots of useful information about their role in a unique way that gave them the confidence to deal with real life situations. Since then, three of the junior employees who attended the course have been promoted.

"Usually, specialised sectors such as ours train people how to pitch for new accounts on the job," she says. "This means we only get to see whether they're any good at the same time as the prospective client. Although feedback after the event definitely helps, we wanted to find a way of making sure employees knew what they were doing before they got to that stage.

"It was essential to take people out of their comfort zone and make them feel like they were really taking part in a new business pitch for the first time, not just undergoing a bit of theory. Even though individuals worked in teams of three, everyone was forced to think for themselves, from making sure they had the right research to sorting out logistics for their presentation."

### **Train of thought**

However, there are some things that training alone simply can't deliver, argues Andrew McMillan, customer service manager at John Lewis. The company has won numerous accolades for its customer service by reiterating the mantra that it is "not a strategy but a way of life".

Placing it apart from the competition is a continuous focus on service that starts before people considering a frontline role even accept a job with the leading retailer. Managers are also encouraged to lead and coach individuals rather than manage tasks. "The most vital requirement is to recruit individuals with the right motivation in the first place. Our recruitment criteria are all based around attitude and personality – skills you can't train – rather than looking for previous experience which you can train," McMillan says.

"Get the right people and everything else becomes so much easier. Every offer letter contains a paragraph explaining that the potential new employee is entering into a two-way contract should they choose to accept the offer. We, as a co-owned business, offer a range of benefits that are unrivalled in our sector. They, as a potential new employee, must commit to looking after their fellow partners and give an exceptional level of service to our customers."

He emphasises that in an environment that trades seven days a week and has a high proportion of part-time employees, any formal training has to be succinct and effective. Much of this is done using a short, internally produced DVD illustrating the standards the company requires. This is followed up by on-the-job coaching and feedback from the line managers. Every partner has a brief but formal assessment of their ability every month using performance observations when interacting with a genuine customer.

"Partners are generally very positive about our approach, helped by the fact that they have the right motivation in the first place and we are very transparent and clear on what is expected before they even join us," he adds.

### **People power**

Whether you opt to take the extensive or minimal training approach, gauging what the customers (and in some cases the client) thinks about your methods is vital if you want to get it right. Cooney says this can be measured in a number of ways from service specific key performance indicators, such as the number of complaints or customer satisfaction levels, through to overall business performance and the ultimate bottom line.

She advocates carrying out customer satisfaction surveys before and after training to measure change levels and, similarly, employee satisfaction surveys should also be carried out for those who attend training sessions. "The more satisfied the employee, the more likely they are to provide excellent service levels," Cooney adds.

John Lewis conducts several mystery shopper outings in every branch each month. It also uses comment cards, conducts a customer panel and conducts regular exit surveys in each branch. Its performance in independent consumer surveys, such as those carried out in *Which?* magazine, are considered extremely important as well.

For McMillan, though, there is no before and after training to consider. John Lewis constantly scrutinises its customer service to achieve higher and even better standards, and he believes it is just as much about the person as it is the programmes the company has to offer. "Partners do increase in confidence when we have completed product training with them," he concedes, "but everyone is expected to be welcoming and friendly from day one. If they can't do that without training, we've recruited the wrong person."

*MyCustomer.com 13-Apr-2007*

*Categories: Customer Service, Strategy, Features*

<http://www.insightexec.com/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=132935>

All contents copyright © [InsightExec](http://www.insightexec.com) 2007 All rights reserved.