

When someone telephones your company...

Do they get a response that encourages them to stay – or are they driven towards your competitors? How your staff talks to people who call can attract – or repel – those people. And that means a better business, or a failing one.

The quality of service provided by a service desk is heavily subjective to the success of the customer contact and does not solely hinge on the efficiency of a system.

A company will only have one chance to make a first impression on a client that is not only lasting, but will set the tone for any further interaction with the client. “In most cases the service desk agent has the privilege of making first contact. The question to ask is: Do I trust my agents to have what it takes to impress a client?” asks Yolande du Plooy, principal consultant at Foster-Melliar.

The only differentiating factor in a service-orientated world filled with high expectations is the quality of service delivered, which places an immense amount of power in the hands of those who make first contact with clients. Excellent service is therefore not negotiable and it is absolutely vital to find the right people to do it.

Bad service is remembered

“I cannot remember the last time I have received excellent customer service. I can, however, remember the last five incidents where I received appalling service as well as telling everyone willing to listen about my experience. Bad news travels much faster than good, and is something a service provider must never lose sight of,” warns Yolande.

Statistically it costs six times as much to gain a new customer than retaining an existing one. A recent international survey identified the following reasons for clients leaving: 69% of customers leave because a company is ‘just the same as everybody else’; 13% of customers leave because they are not happy with the product and 9% leave due to competitive reasons.

The statistics are quite staggering and it is therefore crucial to look after existing customers who comprise a substantial part of any business. “A logical place to start is to ensure that the staff who are in contact with customers are properly trained on how to talk to them, how to make them feel important and how to get the most out of the communication session. Staff is often hastily chosen to fill a service desk, not always having the required skill and competencies to deliver the service customers expect. Saving money by not training staff members or employing “cheaper” agents will cost money in the long run,” says Yolande.

There is more to customer service than just knowing the product, she says...

Needs have changed

“Customer needs have changed over the years and a company will prosper if its service has evolved to accommodate these changing needs. Statistics show that customer satisfaction comprises of psychological needs being met (75%) and business needs being met (25%). This statistic alone should give a clear indication of just how vital it is to address exceptional customer service delivery.”

Telephonic communication is different to face-to-face communication as there are different aspects that are accentuated in each. Part of the message relayed through face-to-face communication is lost and other factors come into play. A verbal message comprises of words being used (7%), tone of voice (38%) and body language (55%).

Each individual is taught from birth to communicate not only verbally, but non-verbally too. The following clearly defines the difference between the two: in face-to-face communication, the words *actually being used* constitute only 7% of the total message, the other 93% is conveyed via body language and the tone of the voice. In the case of a telephone conversation, however, the actual *words being used* constitute 15% of the message, while the tone of the voice delivers the rest of the message – 85%. Body language is, naturally, absent from the equation during a telephone conversation.

“It is absolutely crucial to ensure that agents can deliver the right message in the right way. The ability to communicate effectively using only words and tone of voice takes practice and familiarity with communication techniques.

Communication is a two-way street and agents need to be trained on how to recognise signals from customers over the phone. The importance of training service desk agents in every aspect of communication can not be stressed enough, especially the ability to listen to unspoken messages,” says Yolande.

Don't be 'the same as any other'

“Barriers to communication must be successfully overcome in order to attempt to resolve the business need of the customer. Making a reluctant effort without any proper training will lead to an organisation falling into the 69% margin of customers leaving because ‘the company is just the same as any other’,” she warns.

This is just the tip of the iceberg as there are many other aspects that come into play when delivering a service. Service desk staff is not only expected to manage expectations but they need to identify the customers needs, build relationships, be culturally aware and sensitive, be professional, be able to *listen*, and not just hear. It is also important they be able to communicate in both a formal and informal manner, understand the barriers to listening, and be able to use questions effectively, talk the right language, be able to identify and resolve conflict and most importantly have a service attitude.

The first step in achieving exceptional customer satisfaction is to make the customer feel like a customer. “Why do most consumers in South Africa feel as if this is too much to ask? Have we spent enough time and money on Service Desk staff to equip them with the skills needed to achieve this? If not, a change is needed. Customers are the most important asset to any organisation and they expect nothing less than being treated accordingly,” says Yolande.

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