Execution *focus*

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Customer Focus

Building customer focused teams & organizations

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"Deep customer focus is not about buying customer-relationship-management software that tracks customers' purchases. It is not about designing sophisticated new products like mobile phones or iPods — or even about processes that allow a car to be built with customer-requested features. It's about an attitude that gets deep inside a company into what it is, what it does and what it prides itself on" (Vandermerwe, 2004, p.26)

Customers in India are extremely diverse, those that live in villages and are uneducated to those that are educated, have travelled extensively, and are informed. Customers can no longer be manipulated, and organizations cannot have a one size fit all option in dealing with them. Customization and individualization are key (Cook,2017). Innovation to improve the customer experience is important.

Customers now make their decisions not by price alone but by the value of their experience. This experience is not restricted to the time of buying alone but spans across from the time they get on the website or speak to somebody at the company to the time they buy to the after-service experience. The service experience is transferable in the minds of the customer. "The customer makes conscious and unconscious comparisons between different service companies – irrespective of sector" (Cook,2017, p.7).

Besides customer service there is a non-quantifiable but highly impactful concept of customer care. This involves building an emotional connect with the customer and investing in their needs. It means going above and beyond to help the customer. It could involve staying back late for the customer, create a unique and personalised experience, be kind and helpful etc. (Fontanella,2022). Customer care contributes to a better service and experience leading to the customer feeling valued and hence more satisfied.

Organizations with a customer focus build their businesses around what the customer needs which helps build relationships, helps customers achieve their goals and leads to customer satisfaction (Afshar,2021). An organization who claims to be customer focused is one whose mission, culture and values revolve around their customers.

Vandermerwe (2004) enlists 10 breakthroughs an organization must go through to have a deep customer focus.

Breakthrough 1: Create strategic excitement

The initial breakthrough occurs when the sufficient and correct number of people in the organization feel that what they are doing for their customers is not enough and they may lose opportunities if course correction is not done. Getting people to see and feel is the crucial part and the toughest. Getting people charged up when there is a crisis is easier but doing that before a crisis hits and inspiring them to change direction then, is what is difficult.

Breakthrough 2: Points of light

Once employees have become excited about the new direction, able and willing people to lead the way are important. It's important to have the right people who understand the need and who motivate their colleagues and teams as well. Since it involves doing things differently, being sensitive to the customers and reacting accordingly, these employees need to be open and willing to break from the past. These employees are the points of light. There is no point wasting time on incorrect people who are resistant to change.

Breakthrough 3: Articulate the new marketplace

Relying on market research alone is not much help in creating a future that customers are unable to imagine, it has be supplemented with an intelligent hypothesis. Once a market space has been defined it allows the employees to visualize the impact of their efforts on the customer outcome. Those that work in silos and departments will understand how they fit into an offering that has been contributed to by different departments.

Breakthrough 4: Identify the value opportunities

This stage involves creating a team with the best brains led by the CEO or head of a division. It involves taking a closer look at the customer activity cycle, which is all the activities a customer goes through, to achieve an outcome. This enables the team to identify opportunities that will lead to good customer outcomes.

Breakthrough 5: Build a compelling case

Scanning the customer activity cycle helps companies to also create rich stories with details, to make a case for the offerings both internally and externally. Stories have a rational and emotional appeal to people and create excitement rather than the fear that a business plan could generate. Stories help employees visualize their purpose and the impact of their contributions and reveal to customers their destination and how to get there.

Breakthrough 6: Size the prize

This involves seeing how they can increase their numbers. It involves building longer, deeper, and diverse revenue streams which will convert into more wealth.

Breakthrough 7: Model the concept

It's important to prove to the customers and the employees that the concept is working. Modelling involves taking the new concept and making it work by involving a set of customers who get the concept. It would involve doing a workshop with them with the senior executive not as a promotional event but in the spirit of research. Helping the customers understand the customer activity cycle will enable them to confirm the gaps and the usefulness of the offerings.

Breakthrough 8: Get people working together

Getting people to work together on a new concept in the organization is not a easy task. Its important early on to invite the 'points of light' across different departments and to work together which leads to more engagement that moves through the organization. Working in silos will not lead to the needed customer engagement and outcome, employees need to cooperate and collaborate and present a united front to the customer.

Breakthrough 9: Get critical mass

When the organization gets a critical mass of customers, to respond to the deep customer focus then they start reaping benefits. Some ways to do this to make it easy on the customer's finances and to demonstrate through numbers the financial and non-financial benefits to the customers. Companies need to become indispensable to customers or they will not get that critical mass. Genuine investments and early on are important to beat competition.

Breakthrough10: Gather momentum

When customers find the companies become indispensable to attaining their outcome, they begin to influence other customers and that is when revenue starts to increase. With knowledge as the main ingredient in customer value, the enterprise can keep ahead of competitors. Thus, in the gather-momentum stage of the process, the key concern of executives should not be, "Do we own 'it'?" but rather, "Do we understand how to do 'it'?" and, "Are we using, reusing and updating our knowledge?" (pg.34)

Becoming customer focussed is the only way to outdo competition whose face and form keep changing. It's not an easy task but once its imprinted in the mind of the employees and therefore in the culture , it will influence all future actions and lead to rewarding outcomes.

The following are ways that organizations can instill a customer focus in their teams and the organization as a whole

Ways to build a customer focused team and organization

Making customer service a value and providing regular training

It's important to make customer focus and service an organizational value, if you want it to be seep down to the last person and become a way of life and part of your organizational culture. Regular training is needed for employees to understand the kind of experience you want your customers to have.

Getting buy-ins

We at Metis believe that getting buy ins from leaders and your team about the need to be customer oriented is extremely important for any plan or activity you embark on, to be successful. Giving well researched reasons and facts for the need is important to convince them to give it their best. "Companies need a systematic process to activate deep customer focus that shapes priorities, behavior and systems. Commitment is critical." (Vandermerwe, 2004, p.27).

Listen to the customer

Its very important to put one'self into the shoes of the customer to understand their needs, their goals, their feelings and what is driving them to make a decision. Understanding customer needs should be a part of the culture of the company and everyone including non-customer facing employees should get a chance to deal with customers starting from the CEO. Conducting surveys to understand what your customers think of you and monitoring what is said by customers on social media can be powerful.

Open communication

Transparent communication with customers is most appreciated. Informing them of the delays, the changes and providing reasons, will go a long way in gaining their trust and appreciation.

Make goals around your customers

If you want the organization and teams to be customer focused, goals around them need to be made with clear deadlines. Have customer surveys and reviews to understand the progress you have made on your goals. Employees need to be trained to think of the customer while making every decision, this will slowly create a shift in the culture towards customer orientation

Include customers in your brand identity

Have your customers be a part of the logo or engage in building the brand or marketing strategy, to make them feel they are important to you.

Encourage and allow for ideas

Coming up with new ideas should no longer be one departments job description and working with the customers to come up with ideas that benefit them is the way forward. "Today the success of the brand is a cocreation between the customer and the company" (Cook,2017,p.7). The customer has much greater power in the kind of products and services that will hit the market.

Break down internal barriers

Organizations need to maintain a united front when they have to deal with customers so it's a seamless interaction for them. This doesn't happen a lot of times with customers having to repeat information or explain to different departments repeatedly.

Unravel and study the data

Customers expect companies to use new technology to get information that will improve their experience.

Appoint a customer focused advocate

Customer focus tends to lose focus at times and its important to have a person who is in charge of maintaining the continuity of it. The role involves the person to voice the customer needs, to look at data and to make sure all activities are having an impact on the business

Adapt, Improve, and exceed expectations

Assess and monitor the changing needs of customers and make changes in your product. This could be an improvement in an existing product or an introduction of new products. This will help improve their experience. Always look for ways in each step of the entire process when you can exceed their expectations. Customers can get a lot of information online, so a sales pitch may not be enough to retain the customer, it is the experience.

Provide incentives to employees

For very positive interaction and good customer experience rating, the team or individual has got, should be celebrated. To reinforce this behavior, they can be given appropriate incentives.

Be solution oriented

Whatever the problem or situation might be, employees need to think positively and jump right in to focus on how they can solve the problem in the best possible way with the resources available. Customers appreciate those that help them solve their problems.

Sources: (Cook, 2017; Vandermerwe, 2004; Afshar,2021; Fontanella, 2021, Indeed editorial team 2021)

What customer service standards are you following? Assess and find out!

We at Metis have created a short survey that your company could use to understand where you stand on dimensions related to customer service standards and reflect on what you can do to course correct and move towards being a company that is deeply focused on its customers in the truest sense. Click on the link below to download and use the document https://metisindia.com/download/4724/?tmstv=1671607510

Conclusion

Being customer focused isn't just saying the customer is always right, it means being completely aligned to the customers needs and doing things that will ensure their success. If you focus on how, you can make your customer successful you will automatically become successful.

Caring for your customer, providing great service at all points of interaction, using knowledge to fulfill all needs in the customer activity cycle will not only make your organization indispensable to the customer but will ensure a great experience leading to satisfied and thus loyal customers. This is what organizations need to always strive for.

Resources

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