

deliver

A Summer of Service...

Through the eyes of the customer

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What a summer is has been for service – well for some. The season has shown that our infrastructure remains nowhere near receiving an Olympic Bronze and it is possible we may struggle to receive a Gold for 2012. Where it has all gone pear shape you can bet there are core characteristics and consistencies in those organisations that have not excelled.

There is no doubt that it is a messy business to get organisations and businesses to perform and, in my experience, the formula for getting it right comes in all shapes and sizes of the leadership paradigm.

What I do know is that in excellence organisations – as with the police– the boardroom should be out 'on the beat'. I have had the honour to work with a number of organisations where their leadership was measured, authoritative and where the recognition and respect of the boardroom was sold at front line service delivery level. I have also been involved with others whose eyes were off the ball and they wondered why they lost possession, let alone their purpose and patronage.

Many managers believe that their job is to push people or drive them; leaders believe they are there to lift and support people. Managers in mediocre organisations believe that they should talk at people by telling, directing and lecturing; leaders in excellence believe in engaging in dialogue with people by asking, requesting, and listening. Managers in ailing arenas believe they know the answers; leaders believe they must seek the answers. This is true whether you are in banking, retail, local authorities or any customer-centric combine.

Let's take a recent service shambles...Whilst one has every empathy for the effects of terrorism alerts on those it affects, the saga of recent times at airports allowed confusion among passengers and staff. Effects were compounded due to an appalling lack of information, plus inconsistent and ill-considered emergency measures – it was, for example, ok for a passenger to carry hand luggage 35cm high but unsafe to carry 45cm high. It was deemed safe to buy water airside on flights to Europe but not USA. There were no restrictions at all on European flights coming into UK. Why? To outsiders it appears idiocy.

This country's customers are used to arrogance breeding apathy. Take an organisation such as BAA which, since its privatisation some 17 years ago, has owned and operated seven of the UK's largest airports and a near monopoly in Scotland. That cannot bode well for customer service let alone the monopoly on market power pricing. BAA deserves to have the Competition Commission on its back, which will trigger more uncertainty with lengthy inquiry into the state and status of Britain's airports.

However, a success story can be created if airline operators use this seasonal saga to innovate and to learn, learn, learn to manage from mistakes. For instance, an airing of dirty linen in public between Britain's two biggest transport groups is unforgivable as it does little for customer comfort, credibility, and confidence in their conduct.

The August nightmare at London Heathrow emitted eulogies of errors, common in organisations failing in customer service. A 'law' in customer service is remembering your core business. In the above instance, airport operators need to remember their prime duty is

to deliver passengers, baggage and freight safely, securely and promptly to their airline customers at all times.

Some airport operators assume they have licence to print money building ever-larger shopping malls with captive market throughput. But they need to get back to basics. They are not in the business of running shopping malls with runways attached. Some of the operators' utterances in present crisis reveal their management style leaning towards shopping mall managers and property developers and falling out of touch with their real customers in aviation.

Above aside, whilst air travel may not be the same again this could become a best brew for customers. For example, I for one am delighted there has been a halt to the inexorable increase in hand luggage, which on my recent flight caused chaos in the congested cabin making it seem a shanty town rather than an Airbus. Staff struggled to find space, amid squabbling and squashing under seats. A characteristic for restoring brand reputation is that it usually takes a disaster to learn from our weaknesses, whether that is Foot & Mouth fallout, fuel failures or the airport events. Serious incidents will hopefully spur innovation, from the perspective of the customer, and improve service delivery levels for the future.

Air travel is so vital today that airports and operators will be forced to innovate. A lateral thinker would suggest futuristic foldaway suits and inflatable shoes or making planes out of the same material as the indestructible black box – but that's for Boeing & Airbus to think through. However, what customers want is for the brand and service to be easy, effortless and effective. For instance, as laptops must now be placed in the holding area, why not provide simple built-in onboard laptops able to accept passengers' memory sticks? Or, as luggage remains with rigid restrictions for many moons, why not offer priority delivery services for premium-class passengers to reduce their time at carousels?

In order to achieve excellence, if you can't be first in your business offering then you must be different and daring – no matter what industry you are in. That's what excellence organisations do. They calculate the customer centricity, visitor vibrancy and the value-driven link between service quality, customer behaviour and financial return. They know that attention to detail creates service and product quality: quality generates

quality talk, which generates more and more customers.

There is another reason why earlier events must restore the brand reputation. Bad experiences with any organisation can create deep, lasting feelings and emotions which complainants then bring to a complaint handling system that does little or nothing to calm and address those feelings – just the opposite.

In a WOW organisation making mistakes helps all to learn from salt in the wound. As such, excellence organisations are commensurate with competent complaints handling, customer clinics, people and product panels – knowing that life without feedback is a killing activity for any unity or utility. As General George Patton said "Dissent is good – if everyone is thinking alike, then someone isn't thinking." An example of above is BUPA, who have invited their customers to give their views on what they want and expect from their health provider. They achieve this by asking for volunteers to join quarterly 'member panels' to express candid opinions and experiences to BUPA management. Apart from anything else, an organisation wins lots of spurs when it discusses with outsiders how best to improve the service offering. David Brent, the manager in the TV programme *The Office* said, "a problem shared is a problem halved, so is your problem really yours or just half of somebody else's?"

Whilst I have sympathy for an attitude of believing in doing things right, I much prefer the approach of believing in doing the right things. Let's take an example – public facing communication has become an integral part of all sector operations and particularly when handling telephone queries. With the diversity of dialogue being fielded by the public, customer relationship management is essential to ensure the caller is diverted to the right individual on the first attempt, with accurate information on hand on their screen in order the query can be dealt with competently. Does this happen? When it does I will waken up in the morning and say 'goody goody I have to ring a call-centre today.'

Readers know who gets above right and who give crrrap – and it is little to do with where the call centre is based. In fact, the key here is consistency, making customer service part of your organisational DNA. I witness this with Westminster City Council (WCC) in the heart of London. You can phone their Crime Reduction Unit, or their innovative Anti Social Behaviour Hotline or the departments that deal with all the hanging baskets that flower Westminster streets, street cleaning or the folk

who take away your old fridge. It's the same story – quality talk – consistently across all departments which lets me, the council tax payer, know WCC have kudos and charisma in their Cabinet and a loyalty to the electorate to give service satisfaction.

Poor organisations believe their power lies in their knowledge; in superior environments they know that their power lays in their vulnerability. In this way, you create a culture where managers do not believe in controlling others through the decisions they make, but rather in facilitating others to make decisions and empowering them to implement them. I saw that approach clearly when ASDA captured market share from the larger supermarkets such as M&S and Sainsbury.

I have sat in a Boring Boardroom which believes in solving problems, making decisions and then delegating responsibility; this is nothing compared to being in a Buzz Boardroom that believes in facilitating others to solve problems, making decisions and a belief in modelling accountability. Managers in handicapped and hampered hamlets believe in creating structure and procedures for people to follow.

Yet, when you enter an organisation where its value and vision is its brand reputation you discover the boardroom believing in creating a vision and promoting flexibility through values as guidelines for behaviour. Their Managers do not believe their job is to point out errors, but rather believe their job is to celebrate learning and, in a way, a love for life. It's about breaking the mould of habit and giving it all you've got - for without adding value you've got nothing. An example would be in some hotels: yes, they have given the visitor the added value of towelled slippers. Yet the mould is that the slippers are always circa size 8, which is pretty useless if you are a lady with a size 3 or 4.

A recent survey has tourists telling Britain "you're a rip-off" with prices that astonish foreign visitors. The banking group UBS produced a survey on prices and earnings around the world that found, for example, that a 120-mile train journey in UK was 65% more expensive than any other similar train journey in the world.

Britons who travelled abroad came back to UK utterly confused why food, products and other services cost so much. Tourists get perplexed not at UK prices per se but the reasons for them. Tyler Cowan Professor of Economics at George Mason University in Virginia says the UK "is not the wealthiest country in the world but it has some of the most outrageous prices". His website goes on to suggest that British consumers are "used to being mistreated and cheated. What surprises many American visitors is how seldom locals make a fuss about bad service or poor quality goods."

The secrets of service - through the lens of the customer – is you seldom get that second chance to create the first impression. Britain can ill afford such a reputation and it is up to each one of us to correct it across the board - whatever business we are in.

What we are going to have to do by 2012 to win is to teach a lot of old dogs new tricks. To get rid of too much arrogance which breeds apathy. When latter happens for customers, consumers, clients and communities you commit complacency. We need now to set an Olympic Standard - seamless services. We need to add value. When seeing it through the eyes of the visitor won't many would-be cultural tourists be put off by what they perceive as our overcrowded rip-off centres?

Many organisations must recharge their batteries rather than overcharge - what is a customer really worth? Distinguish between customer service & customer valuation – what have you done for me today rather than to me? No point in changing the crew and the catering when basically the ship is going the wrong direction. It's about service provision versus its perception, loyalty through knowledge and touch. All sounds like common sense – however as my highland granny said – "common sense is nae so common".

To hear Lynda King Taylor's insights first hand, be sure you don't miss her Customer Service Masterclasses. For more details email info@qualityscotland.co.uk.