**CUSTOMER SERVICE IMPROVEMENT**

The following list will help you identify your strengths and weaknesses to help you improve the quality of service your business is providing to your clients. It is a fact that it costs about five times more to get a new customer than to keep an existing one. It is worth doing all it takes to keep your actual clients.

**EXAMINE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE**

* You are unlikely to get close to your customers unless the culture of your organisation encourages such a relationship. Staff should be trained to think "customer first" – those who are not customer-focused can endanger the success of the business by making inappropriate decisions, failing to respond to changing situations appropriately or quickly enough, or neglecting to serve customers in a way that promotes their loyalty.
* If the culture in your business does not support a customer-focused approach, implement a programme of long-term culture change.
* Remember that every section of your organisation has customers. Staff in direct contact with external customers cannot provide effective service without the internal support of colleagues all along the chain. To encourage internal service departments to adopt an outward-looking customer focus, their operators might work for a week or two in the department they serve.
* Customer focus needs to pervade every level of the business. How often do your key decision-makers and strategy formulator’s deal face to face with customers? Time on the front line would increase their awareness.

**IDENTIFY YOUR CUSTOMERS**

* Your customers are those who use the output of your work. They may be internal to your business (for example, your personnel function has all employees as its customers) or external (members of the public, other businesses, or government or public bodies).
* In identifying customers, distinguish between purchasers and ‘end users’. You will probably wish to compile a database so you can profile your customers.

**PROFILE YOUR CUSTOMERS**

A wide range of factors influences customer behaviour, for example, if you are selling to individuals:

* Gender – particularly where the purchaser or ‘end user’ is not the sole decision -maker;
* Age – different age ranges being more susceptible to targeting by some products than others;
* Marital status – especially combined with other factors such as children and disposable income;
* Homeowner – indicating specific needs and responsibilities that relate to buying patterns;
* Location – urban consumers differ from rural ones; regions differ culturally and economically;
* Lifestyle – since all customers have individual activities, interests, and opinions.

If selling to businesses, you should look at factors like:

* Revenues
* Number of employees
* Industry
* Number of years in business
* Credit rating

These factors become more useful when they are analysed in combination – for example, age, homeowners, and a number of dependent children can indicate the likely amount of a customer's disposable income.

Decide how to approach your customers to find out their basic characteristics. It may not be possible to ask every customer individually, but other fruitful approaches exist, for example:

* Market research
* Questionnaires
* Focus-group discussions
* Customer audits
* Attitude surveys

Take advantage of opportunities to meet business customers at their premises or at yours in a series of Open House or Customer Care Programmes.Membership of user groups, industry liaison meetings, or partnerships arising out of new product development are also ways to reach your customers.

**ASSESS YOUR CUSTOMERS' OPINIONS AND ATTITUDES**

Businesses with an inaccurate perception of their customers' needs most likely:

* make untested and unwarranted assumptions about what customers think;
* rely on weak anecdotal evidence;
* accord too much weight to atypical complaints.

If you don't make an effort to find out what your customers think, you can be caught off balance when they go elsewhere. If you don't know why they are going elsewhere, you can't identify corrective actions. Besides factual information about your customers, find out:

* why customers buy your product or use your service;
* how they use it;
* what their opinion is of your product or service;
* why they choose your offering over the competition;
* what their experience is of your product or service in terms of performance and after-sales care.

Attitudes and opinions are hard to quantify, and many factors influence a decision to purchase or to remain loyal to a particular brand. Customers may be influenced as much or more by their impressions of service – courtesy, promptness, etc. – as by the quality of a product. Exploring these issues requires detailed research, and if you do not have the adequate in-house expertise, you may wish to use an external research agency.

Listen to your frontline staff, who are at the forefront of first hand comments from customers about their satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Consider setting up a procedure for reporting this information. Channels usually employed for customer service can also be used to solicit customers' opinions by an open dialogue that is meaningful to the customer. Such channels include customer charters, warranties, statements (and monitoring) of performance standards, open and willing acceptance of penalties for noncompliance, and refunds in cases of non-satisfaction.

**TAKE ACTION ON YOUR FINDINGS**

Analyse the results of your research, interpret the data, and publicise your findings. You can use your findings to identify where you need to take action to maintain your competitive advantage. It is important to involve your staff in this process; encourage everyone to think "customer first."

It is an ongoing process to pay attention to your customers' needs..It is worth considering establishing a regular research project. To introduce methods of soliciting customers' suggestions and creating response mechanisms or initiating procedures that constantly monitor your market.

**USING THE INTERNET TO IMPROVE CUSTOMER FOCUS**

The internet is increasingly becoming the primary way that customers select items for purchase, specify designs, and submit comments and suggestions on products and services. Used wisely, the internet permits a business to build a closer relationship with its customers than ever before.

**GIVE FEEDBACK TO CUSTOMERS**

It is important to let your customers know that you value their needs and ideas. It may mean publishing a revised mission statement reiterating your commitment to fulfilling their needs or publicising results of surveys and details of new products or product amendments as a result of the research.

Feedback is not a one-off event. It is a continuous process that informs customers of your businesses’ response to successes, mistakes, and new ideas and that encourages further dialogue.

DOS AND DONTS FOR GETTING CLOSER TO CUSTOMERS

Do:

* Look at ways to reward customers for sharing their likes and dislikes.
* Make sure your business culture encourages staff to think "customer first."
* Integrate customer focus with other business activities – make it a cross-departmental, cross-functional initiative.

Don't

* Don't make assumptions about what people think without testing them yourself.
* Don't rely on data from a small sample of customers.
* Don't react too hastily to vociferous complainers – see whether other customers feel the same way.