

The Customer Service Challenge

More often than is desirable, it is said that Barbadian businesses do not provide the level of customer service sought by increasingly demanding consumers. The irony is that the very service providers who are guilty of inadequate service delivery or inappropriate attitudes are themselves consumers of goods and services (and might very well be highly demanding when on the other side of the transaction).

Beyond the employee role, inadequate customer service can also be attributed to deficient performance-oriented organisational cultures. In some instances, the environment stifles the sharing of information to employees who should be more knowledgeable of the operations of the enterprise. Thus, there is a reduction in their ability to effectively address the needs and queries of the customers. In other cases, employees are not empowered to adequately help customers due to rigid compliance to job descriptions or operational procedures. Some managers may argue that they need to make sure that they do everything so that it is done 'the right way'. However, such is an indictment upon the hiring, training, development and management activities of these institutions.

I believe that the need for each and every one of us to act as professionally as possible was well articulated at a forum convened by the International Labour Organization, the Caribbean Employers' Confederation and the Caribbean Congress of Labour. The Minister of Labour within the Government of Antigua and Barbuda proposed "...undoubtedly, the question of productivity is one that this region needs to address and address quickly. There has been a romanticised Caribbean culture of being laid back, the so-called Carnival mentality. That is well and good at Carnival time and I am sure that you would all agree that it brings its benefits. However, we cannot afford to accept that myth and cause it to determine the way we conduct business. Even if it were true in the days gone by and even if it could have worked then, it cannot sustain now".

Several issues impact upon the level of satisfaction experienced by the patrons of an organisation:

- ***Attitude and Demeanor***: customers want their needs to drive the operations of the business and not to be treated as an unwelcome imposition by personnel (managerial and non-managerial);
- ***Employee Perception of Self Worth***: staff must believe that they are capable of delivering the products and services demanded by the customer (for which they have been hired);
- ***Provision of Greater Service than Required***: dissatisfied customers are those whose expectations surpass the quality and/or experience provided by the company's product or service. Therefore, when you have a culture that encourages performance beyond the minimum that is required, customer commitment is much more attainable. Of course, the prerequisite is an awareness of what the customer desires.

- ***Good job-ability fit***: employees should possess the attitude, aptitude and interest that facilitates good performance within their work. Institutional initiatives such as training, mentorship, orientation etc may be needed to promote such an environment.
- ***Customer orientation***: everyone in the business must be cognisant of the fact that the success and viability of their organisation is dependent upon the customer. Increasingly, customers expect to be treated as an invaluable part of the business transaction.
- ***Awareness of the organisation's mandate, products and services***: organisations can no longer afford to successfully hoard all information at the top of the hierarchical structure. Those persons who directly interact with the customer need to be very aware, so as to provide the client with the best advice and support. Remember, it is difficult for employees to help the business go where it needs to, when they do not have a clue where it is heading.
- ***Acknowledgement of Employee Contribution***: if it is true that the consumer is vital to organisational well-being, then the employees who render the services of a firm, should also be of paramount importance. However, too many employees are merely perceived as a cost.
- ***Dedication and commitment***: there needs to be the institutionalisation of a culture that encourages personnel (at all levels) to be dedicated to providing 'a good day's work for a good day's pay'. As the phrase highlights, both the employer and employee have a role to play within the existence of such an environment.
- ***Operational standards***: performance must be planned and managed in such a way that appropriate standards are instituted and adhered to within the strategic focus and operations of the firm. Benchmarking (sector-specific or general) can be the means of developing your performance targets.
- ***Motivation***: positive attitudes and work performance must be recognised, reinforced and rewarded, in order to ensure that employees are motivated to sustainably act in a manner that satisfies the customer and benefits the firm.
- ***Innovation***: the harnessing of the diverse skills, knowledge and experiences of all members of staff can lead to an environment of creativity and learning that benefits the customer and counters the competition.

In my opinion the Cruise Line industry exemplifies a benchmark against which one can directly or indirectly assess an organisation's level of customer service delivery.

Cruise Casestudy

The cruise ship in question exemplifies the Global Community concept, in that it is owned by a Miami-based company that trades on the New York Stock Exchange; it was

built in Italy and is captained by Italian officers; it has an international crew that caters to customers who originate from many countries; and it tours the beautiful Caribbean region. Despite such tremendous diversity, passengers are made to feel most welcome and appreciated by the crew and operational systems of the ship.

With over 1,000 crew members, teamwork and coordination are fundamental to the sound execution of activities, which are not only necessary to keep the 101,353-ton vessel in superb working order but also to keep approximately 3,000 guests in total comfort and awe. Such represents an enviable task for many land-based businesses.

The slogan for this cruise line is 'The Most Popular Cruise Line in the World'. Such is attributable in no small measure to the discipline, professionalism and friendliness of staff members. Hard work is no scarce commodity for staff who may work around 15 hours a day, each day of the week, within a contract period of six to ten months. However, there is no doubt that everything is geared towards customer satisfaction and that is what pays the bills. Even the names of the vessels within the company have an alluring appeal.

Sound recruitment, training and high operational standards are obviously pivotal factors within the development and sustainability of such a customer friendly climate. For example, human resource development is provided via a 'college ship' that facilitates the formative training process. Additionally, technology has been harnessed in order to render the guests' experience as comfortable, safe and hassle-free as possible, for example a 'smart card' that acts as an electronic photo ID mechanism for entering and exiting the ship; as a debit card and an electronic room key.

I believe that continued cooperation between Barbados and the cruise line industry can foster:

- heightened customer service focus;
- human resource development;
- promotion of tourism as a viable and professional endeavour;
- promotion of project management, event planning and other logistical methodologies;
- augmented market reach and penetration for land-based tourism offerings;
- provision of more goods and services to liners, thus generating greater foreign exchange; and
- expansion of cultural and linguistic competencies.

My thanks go out to the accommodating staff of the travel agency that was instrumental in providing my wife and me with the opportunity to enjoy a truly wonderful experience.

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