

## **Sustainable Customer Service Performance Requires These Three Actions**

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Is your customer service performance sustainable? “Sustainability” defines a process that can be maintained at a certain level indefinitely. Most recently, the term has been applied to energy production that involves renewable resources or does not harm the environment and thus, is sustainable. However, it can also be applied to various activities of business including customer service.

Clearly most businesses desire to and usually plan to provide great customer service on a long-term basis. However, judging from the number of people who consult on the topic and news stories related to problems in the area, many businesses appear unable to maintain service at the desired level. In other words, their customer service is not sustainable. Is yours?

Customer service performance that is not sustainable can do a great deal of harm to your relationship with your customers because you create expectations for them that, overtime, you are unable to meet. This can increase customer dissatisfaction and complaints. It can also cause frustration for your employees when they find that circumstances prevent them from performing at the service level expected.

So, how can customer service be made sustainable in your business? Here are three actions you must take to improve customer service sustainability.

### **1) Establish a Longer Horizon with Short-Term Goals that are Obtainable.**

Often firms start on a customer-service-improvement program with the idea of making grand changes in the near term and set new service levels that are substantially higher than the current level. They then find that their lofty goals, while obtainable for short periods, simply can't be maintained. Perhaps the strain is too great on the staff or the system. The staff may need further training that has not yet been accomplished. Perhaps the goals are simply unrealistic for the time frame given the business situation involved. Over time, employees become frustrated, the service level drops and the business' attempt at instituting “great customer service” fails.

Starting a customer-service-improvement program is much like starting a personal exercise program. To avoid problems, it must be done in defined, obtainable steps over a reasonable period of time. So, to build sustainability, make short-term changes involving reasonable goals that can be clearly obtained. Achieve these goal levels, and establish them as the norm before moving on to further obtainable improvements. This “step approach” gives the employees a chance to adjust, allows possible changes in staffing to be made and tests the process involved (the steps involved in providing the service) to insure that it can handle the adjustment. If problems exist, these will come to the

forefront, and needed changes can be instituted before any further improvements are attempted.

The goal here is not just sustainability of service but also reliability in performance for the customer. Customers would rather have your service be reliable and consistent than have it be occasionally outstanding but inconsistent. Making smaller changes over time can provide sustainability and thus, the reliable performance desired by your customers.

## **2) Obtain Employee Buy-In**

Whether you call them employees, associates, teammates or use some other term, it is your people at the front line of interaction with the customer who will make or break your business. Too often, businesses will institute a new service directive without achieving a buy-in from the employees who must provide it. Frequently, employees are simply told, “This is what you are to do from now on.” While they may meet the new standards for a period of time, they are less likely to continue long-term because they are being forced to comply rather than buying into the change. To accomplish buy-in and commitment, do the following:

- Explain why the change is taking place. It could be a function of competition, customer requests, employee suggestions, etc. People respond better to change when an explanation is provided.
- Explain what’s in it for them. The increase in service may place greater pressure on the employees involved. Even if it doesn’t, change can still be painful. Employees are more likely to buy-in and perform if there is an advantage from their standpoint. Perhaps there is a positive trade off that should result (e.g., more satisfied customers leading to more commissioned sales). Maybe incentives can be incorporated that recognize the greater effort required and reward performers (e.g., bonuses, hours flexibility, awards).
- Get their feedback. Explain what change will occur and request their insights, suggestions and concerns. The fact that you have shown interest in their views will increase their willingness to perform.
- Provide training. Depending upon the changes that are required, training can be an important element leading to employee buy-in and sustainability. Training demonstrates importance of the change. It also demonstrates commitment of management to its employees since without training, employees are simply left to make things work on their own.

## **3) Obtain Customer Feedback**

The concept of sustainable customer service only makes sense if the actions performed impact the customer in a way that contributes to the business’ bottom line. If the service action or improvement does not increase customer use of the business, obtain a greater share of spending, fend off competition or increase sales leading to greater profits, it cannot and should not be sustained. In other words, you must know whether or not service changes are needed and, if so, which service features are worth adding or

improving. Customer feedback, obtained through focus-group discussion or more formal survey methods, can help you with this in the following ways:

- Feedback on performance is needed before service improvements are undertaken. This information can initially indicate whether there is a problem needing improvement. It can then serve as a benchmark for comparison with feedback obtained after the improvement program has been established to determine whether efforts at improvement have been successful.
- Feedback helps determine service actions to institute and their priorities. You should start with those changes of high-value to the customer that are low-cost to implement. Customer feedback is needed to determine which actions these are.
- You can determine how customer preferences change over time. The fact that customer service performance can be sustained does not mean your customers still consider your current level of performance satisfactory or even find the actions you are taking of value. Customers' preferences and desires can change over time due to actions of competitors, changes in technology, social change, change in the economy, etc. With proper feedback, you can determine these changes in preference as they are occurring and work to adapt accordingly.

Customer service performance that is not sustainable frustrates both customers and employees while wasting money. Apply the actions listed above, and your efforts are more likely to be long lasting while contributing to your bottom line.

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