

VIVID SERVICE CULTURE



FROM BRAVE WISH TO REALITY

Customers want to be appreciated. Anyone who takes care of them properly and pays attention to customer relations has the chance of building up a firm body of loyal customers. In times of volatile markets, it is an invaluable competitive advantage. Companies have a great opportunity of getting across individuality and care in a welcoming atmosphere. However here, too, it is true: one customer is not the same as another; and service isn't just service.

By Sabine Hübner

Anyone wanting to sell high-quality products and services does not only need to create the right atmosphere but must also provide exceptional service. This effects customers like a surprise party: they don't expect it, they may initially be slightly irritated, but in the end they're delighted – and can't get enough of it. An effect which reflects back well on the

company. Especially in the case of small and owner-run businesses, service and customer loyalty are the decisive factors for success and for being able to compete with the "big" ones. For it is they who have the personal contact to the customer and know: What does he expect? What does he like? What counts for him? What does he value? The most prized luxury for a customer is when he is treated as an individual – taking

his very personal requests, questions and wishes into account. This requires the necessary calm and space – and staff who have taken the service culture to heart. Building up a service culture must occur step-by-step – and needs constant attention. Customers wish above all to be appreciated. This calls for a well thought out service strategy and a comprehensive service culture – almost a service DNA. Equally important

as the time dimension is that it applies to all levels of the company. Thus a new service mentality can only flourish when – from the boss to the apprentice – everyone is fully committed and puts their whole heart into it.

Service may be a sparkling or – what often seems to go more to the heart of the problem – a nebulous term. This lack of focus still leads to inadequate service orientation in many companies. Whereas it is quite clear what we understand by development, sales or marketing, the situation is quite different when it comes to service. Many people think that simply by including phrases like "service is our top priority" in the corporate guidelines they have done all that is necessary.

However this is just lip service or only true on paper; the customer is hardly likely to notice any improvement. At best the company just confirms its indifference to the topic

of service as an instrument of differentiation, without gaining any decisive competitive advantage in the market.

SERVICE TACTICS

Service has to be more than just a slogan. Every company needs to develop its own individual service strategy, tailored to its own conditions and customer structure. Instead of just a philosophy, concrete guidelines are called for which should be developed by a team, communicated to the staff and then systematically and sustainably implemented, becoming a permanent part of the company culture. Services offered liberally to everyone may from time to time make one or two customers happy, but they have little to do with strategically offered services which guarantee each customer the best possible care at all times. And it is

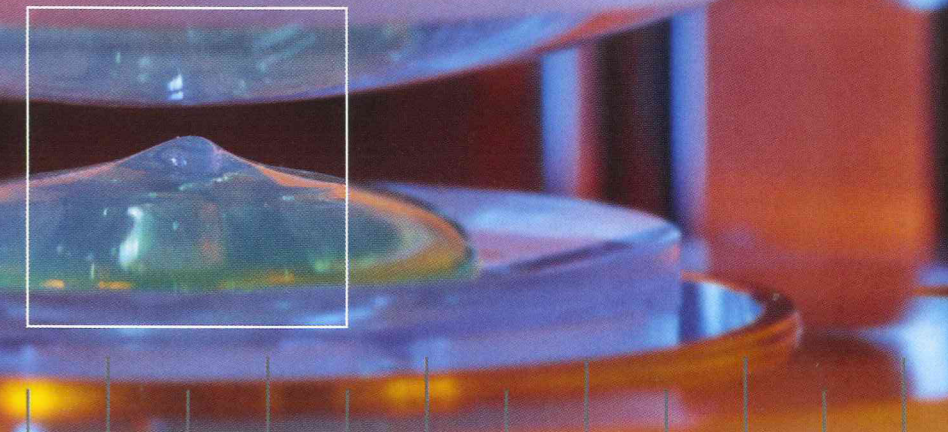
SERVICE HAS TO BE MORE THAN JUST A SLOGAN.

precisely that which the customer expects today. He does not just want to take a chance that he will come across a member of staff who happens to be in a good mood that day. Rather he wants to be certain he can depend on a consistently high standard of service. The development of a service strategy begins in practice with an analysis of the current situation. Here the company defines all its points of contact with the customer as well as the demands and critical points in the eyes of the customer and collates all the services currently offered at every level. After that, improvements need to be defined in the form of clearly formulated levels of services, service modules and procedures; whereby the aim is not only to satisfy the customer in a way that exceeds his expectations but perhaps even get him enthusiastic about the luxury

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service he has received. Only in this way, besides the wishes he has expressed, can the non-verbalized or even subconscious wishes be satisfied as well.

In order to implement a well thought out service culture, every member of staff needs to understand that the company's success depends directly on customer loyalty. And this applies to everyone – whether they are directly in contact with customers or not. Equally important as communicating and living the guideline “from the top down” is the communication in the opposite direction. Only if every member of staff is able to contribute his own ideas, within his own sphere of influence, can one really say that the service culture is being lived. And only then can a “Service DNA” of the company be created, i.e. an unmistakable

code of practice which permeates the approach and attitude to work of all departments and in all areas as far as service is concerned. Clearly defined service procedures are essential on the way to becoming a “service champion” but they should in no way disarm one's own sense

of judgment. Processes can never be perfect and above all they should never become a self-fulfilling occupation; they must always be in the best interest of the customer. The company must therefore take the solution to heart: “We are not all just working for the

process but for the customers”. This means that the standard procedures should cover the normal situation, while staff take charge of the individual cases, which may necessitate going against the standard procedure in order to do what is right for the customer.

STANDING OUT FROM THE PACK

Awareness of the importance of service quality certainly exists. However, when one takes a closer look, many people are just interested in reducing their costs through rationalization. That is a company policy which corresponds to the belief in the overarching importance of price as a competitive instrument and as such is not be brushed aside.

However it misses the point of future markets, as many studies show.

According to these, lived customer orientation even today is an enormous engine for growth and, in view of ever more interchangeable products, mature technologies and saturated markets, it will become even more important in the years ahead.

This development is no surprise to me, since the demands of the modern world of work and of society call for ever more intelligent services.

The customer should get the feeling of a service which makes him more than just

satisfied. This doesn't necessarily cost a lot of money, but it calls above all for spirit, result-oriented, well-qualified and highly motivated staff. Employees who are prepared to take time for the customer, who ask the right questions, listen carefully and are able to offer individual advice. Not just someone who rattles off a standard answer, but rather someone who by empathizing with the customer can see whether it should go quickly or whether the customer is looking for an experience.

In the digital age, personal contact, the quality of a relationship and the results achieved at the point-of-sale are more important than ever. Where the quality of service no longer counts for anything, then often it is only the price which remains as the decisive factor. But anyone who wants to change the service culture needs, above all, to change what's going on in the heads of his customers.

Service excellence means creating an atmosphere in which the customer enjoys making his purchase. The customer will then be happy and say to himself: “Yes, I got exactly what I wanted and I'm happy to have spent my money here.”



Sabine Hübner

Sabine Hübner is an out-and-out entrepreneur, forward thinker and practitioner who puts her clear understanding of service successfully into practice as a shareholder and manager of a medium-sized company. She belongs to the illustrious circle of the “100 Excellent Speakers”. With fresh ideas, scintillating passion, humor and intelligence she brings all aspects of service to life and captivates her audience, winning them over to see things in a different light..