

CALLING FOR CUSTOMER CARE

It was music to my ears. Listening to radio 4's *In Business* programme, I heard a panel of experts calling for companies to measure performance by a new success standard – customers' blood pressure (the aim being to raise it as little as possible). Led by presenter Peter Day, several business and medical professionals agreed that getting just about anything done in today's networked economy is considerably more stressful than it used to be. Just going about our daily life inevitably leads to instances of frustration, anger and anxiety, or, as Peter Day put it so aptly, 'blood pressure moments in the heartbeat economy'.

The general consensus was that it would be a far better, healthier world if our blood pressure weren't raised in this way so frequently. I couldn't agree more. Companies dedicate huge resources to 're-engineering' processes and training people, yet still get customer service so very wrong, so often. It seems to me that organisations of every creed are all too quick to embrace new processes and systems without thinking through the consequences properly.

COST-CUTTING CONSEQUENCES

Management often introduces new ways of working it believes will save costs or improve efficiency. But all too often the result falls way short of expectations. Or worse still, the law of unintended consequences results in costs rising and efficiency nose-diving (take your pick from almost any large scale public sector IT project as evidence).

Often at the centre of such moves is the mantra 'customer first'. Large, complex organisations naturally want to simplify operations to make it easier for customers to use their products or services, and ideally to cut costs. But so often it's customers who benefit the least. Paring down procedures isn't in customers' interests if it means overpowering employees, forcing them to abandon common sense and abdicate decision-making to 'the system'.



Too often companies rush to make changes and cut costs – at the expense of the customer. **Lyn Bicker** makes the case for first class customer service

Take so-called contact centres. Often, the contact that customers have with these centres is less than helpful. Were you treated like an individual when you last called one? Probably not. And I'm willing to bet the staff in the centres aren't either.

My straw poll of recent service experiences unearthed some shocking examples. At the heart of a colleague's surreal conversation with her car insurer was an offshore call centre and an agent with a script. It was read repeatedly, parrot-like, despite my colleague explaining it did not apply to her situation. My colleague asked her to stop reading from the script. The agent couldn't – it was all she was allowed to say.

This call centre process revealed a chasm just as wide as the oceans separating the customer and supplier. What these companies can't seem to remember is that customers are individuals, not numbers.

A friend recently told me how her excellent business banking account manager had been whisked away to another branch after a promotion. The helpful relationship built up over five years went with him. Naturally the bank didn't think to inform her of the change. Messages left for him with its call centre were greeted with

silence. Two months later, a letter arrived: 'I am your new account manager, do contact me if you need me'. Numerous calls elicited no response. My friend left a final message – she was changing banks.

At the root of this breakdown in communication is an organisation that allows its internal machinery to rule, instead of a thinking heart. Anyone experiencing their own 'blood pressure moment' after a brush with the inflexibility of a call centre will rejoice at the remarks of the experts championing the *In Business* cause: 'Call centres are not customer intelligent... buyers of any product or service want a relationship, not a transaction... people at the front end of an organisation need to be as good as the people in the boardroom... people at the top of a company don't know what the customer experience is like.'

HEART OF THE MATTER

When designing rafts of new management processes, companies would do well to heed the call to keep customers' blood pressure on an even keel. After all, it is still possible for organisations to be lean without also being mean to the people they employ and the customers they serve.

If only employers would realise that empowering people, instead of the organisational machine, doesn't mean relinquishing control. Trust is crucial to achieving mutual respect between an organisation, its people and its customers. But trust cultures can only flourish if management processes start and finish with understanding and delivering what customers want. The best organisations not only know this, they also know that individuals' needs vary and change over time. They organise themselves accordingly and, as a result, they thrive – with the possible exception of those in the blood pressure monitoring business. ■



Contact centres all too often send customers' blood pressure sky-high

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