

Surviving in Today's Competitive Marketplace: Making Your Internal Customer Service as On-Brand as Your External Customer Service

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It's a matter of survival.

The idea of "internal customers" was first discussed in the early 1980s. It was an idea that became imbedded inside the discussion about customer service. Most employees began to understand that, even if they didn't have contact with the buying public, they, nonetheless, interacted with fellow employees who, in effect, were their customers.

With rare exception this idea has stuck. In fact, a number of popular books on customer service have been published arguing that if you put employees in the # 1 position, these same employees will then put customers in the # 1 position.

It's simple but powerful psychology. If you work within a culture that encourages people to behave towards fellow employees in the same way you expect these same people to behave towards the consumer, you have an "inside" culture that matches the image you wish to project "outside" about your organization.

Internal customers are critical for two reasons. First, front-facing staff frequently cannot do things for customers without support from their colleagues. So, if service is not delivered inside the organisation, then service delivery to paying customers suffers. Second, this service has to be delivered in the same positive tone as if a paying customer were standing next to the person completing the requested task. The tone and emotional impact of human interactions ripple from the core of the organization out to the shoreline where the customer stands.

A manager who yells and screams at frontline staff, never completes tasks for them in a timely manner, and fails to support them, can hardly expect those same people to jump for joy when asked to be courteous, quick, and supportive towards the paying customer.

If, however, internal customer service is delivered in the same manner that the best (or at least "good") on-brand external customer service is delivered, there is a greater chance for consistent delivery of service that is aligned with the brand promise.

This is the minimum requirement for the service that is referred to as “on-brand service” in the book *Branded Customer Service*. In fact, to be explicit: On-brand service is only possible when service inside the organisation matches the style of branded service delivered to consumers or business customers.

That's a strong statement. In order to fully explain this position, two foundational questions must be answered: what is a brand, and what is branded customer service?

What is a brand?

At its most basic level, a brand is a unique identity. It is a shorthand way anyone (both the marketplace and the employees who represent the brand) thinks about what an organisation does, produces, serves, and sells.

When well conceived and developed, a brand is a vibrant picture held in consumers' minds. Well-executed brands are worth millions, even billions of dollars, in sales and shareholder value. Brands stand out like beacons of light in a sea awash with products and services offered to meet consumer-expression needs. Consumers choose brands in great part to tell the world and themselves who they are. The consumer, in effect, believes, “The only way I can be who I am is to have specific products or services.” A powerful brand, therefore, creates a quasi-monopoly for itself.

Branding is the central element of marketing and business strategies. Brands are, therefore, not just logos, tag lines, or advertising messages. They are largely reflected in behaviours that are delivered to customers. They are also reflected in the behaviours that staff engage in with each other.

So, what is branded customer service?

Branded customer service goes way beyond generic service. It even is more than excellent service. It's an additional and important way to further distinguish a brand's unique identity. It is a strategic and organised way to deliver on-brand customer experiences that magnify brand promises. It adds value to targeted markets by driving home the essence of a brand. In so doing, branded customer service can become so valuable that it takes on the power of a brand unto itself.

Within organisations, the defined style of branded customer service will:

- enhance employee's understanding of what their organisation's brand is all about and what differentiates it from competitors
- take the best attributes of public brand behaviours and bring them inside the organisation

When service experiences are aligned with brand promises, a multiplying effect occurs that is significantly more engaging for staff than when they just represent a well-recognised brand name. This is particularly true when the dominant customer delivery mechanism is through people. Brands are never stated in negative terms, so if the philosophy of the brand can be embedded in corporate cultures, an engaging, more robust culture can be continually reinforced.

When service experiences do not match brand promises, as so frequently happens, trust is undermined and brand erosion occurs. Trust is fundamental to a brand's strength. A trust gap is costly and can ruin or seriously diminish a good advertising campaign. For all these reasons, branded customer service is the new competitive edge in the service economy.

What does this position imply for internal customer service?

Let's consider an example. If a brand embodies a promise of speed, then it is critical that speed become the habitual way that everyone inside the organisation behaves. There might be some exceptions to this if certain internal processes require slow, methodical work. But even methodical work demanding high quality that slows production time down can be accomplished with awareness about the impact of delivery time on customers.

If every thing is done in slow motion, it is difficult to get front-line staff invested in the idea that they meet the needs of their customers in a timely way. If no one inside the organisation bothers to return telephone calls rapidly, if e-mails sit unanswered on computers for weeks or even days on end, and if people simply leave at the end of the day without completing tasks for customers that have been promised to them, it's hard for front-line staff to be focused on speed for the customer — even if advertising campaigns promise it.

Under these conditions, front-line staff quickly learns to tell their customers it will take much longer than the company's advertisements would seem to imply. And, most likely, they will blame their co-workers who do tasks for them. They will say things like, "I'd really like to get this to you by the end of

the day, but I know how things work in our back offices. We'll be lucky to get it to you by tomorrow. You just never know around here."

And, of course, these same staff members begin to take the same approach to speedy delivery when requests are made of them by their colleagues. Corporate mood can quickly sour, and those representing the brand behave as if the brand promise of speed doesn't stand for much at all. In short, if the promised brand experience is not delivered between colleagues, it is very difficult to deliver it to consumers. As Janelle Barlow and Paul Stewart write in *Branded Customer Service*, "When the values of organisations are effectively interwoven into the sinew of organisational behaviour, they can provide clearer guidance for employees on how to behave and operate than HR policy manuals can."

Organisational culture dramatically effects external service delivery. And most employees are strongly affected by the culture in which they work. As Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, the world's biggest retailer, once said, "It only takes a week or two before employees begin treating customers the same way they are treated by their employer." The same thing happens in relationship to treatment by colleagues.

Consider Apple Computers

In fact, most employees in large organisations have little contact with the head of the organisation. Steve Jobs, CEO and brand guru of Apple computer, is notorious for his cruel treatment of staff when small details are not delivered exactly as he wants them. His top team, however, has gotten used to this behaviour, and Jobs, himself, has little contact with Apple employees who speak directly with customers.

People who work directly with Jobs excuse his behaviour saying that it is his attention to detail and the desire to create beautiful and customer-friendly products that is responsible for Apple's success. Even if certain senior level managers at Apple have learned to tolerate, ignore, or even justify his outbursts, it cannot be fun to participate in such exchanges as have been reported in the press. Apple managers must create barriers between Jobs' behaviour and the general Apple staff. In some ways, Apple success combined with Jobs mistreatment of his "internal customers" is the exception that proves the rule.

A real and potentially expensive question has to be posed: how many people have left Apple because of poor treatment inside the organisation? And how costly has this been, both to the Apple brand image and to revenues? If you Google "Steve Jobs," and a part of the human anatomy which will remain unnamed in this article, you will find 74,200 web hits covering the topic (as of July, 2006).

Internal customer service is experienced at a personal level

Brand promises directly affect customers' personal emotional expectations. This is true whether the customer is internal or external and happens because customers experience brands in very personal ways. When an expected internal task is not completed, the staff person — in the very same way as a customer — experiences the failure as a personal slight. In fact, it may be seen as an even more personal way because colleagues frequently know each other.

The staff person will question their colleague's motives — often blaming themselves or wondering if someone is out to get them. These personal connections, whether positive or negative create brand engagement and commitment. As actor and film producer Robert Redford says, "If it's not personal, then there won't be any passion or commitment."

In the same way that customers make judgments about brands when service failures occur, staff members make similar judgments. And because they work inside the organisation, they make these judgments not just about their colleagues but about the entire organisation, its brand, and its ability to live up to its advertised promises.

Most paying customers will leave an company if abused or treated poorly. In fact, they will leave for much less than that. Employees are more forgiving or tolerant than most customers because it's a lot more difficult to change jobs than it is to find, for example, a new provider of airline services. And, in fact, some employees need to keep their jobs they have for a variety of reasons.

When placed in this situation, these "imprisoned" employees are unlikely to consistently maintain an on-brand positive attitude toward customers. Employees easily adopt the attitude, "we say one thing, but we behave entirely different." The cynicism that results from this attitude makes it unlikely that employees will be motivated to promote the brand when they deal directly with customers or with other colleagues. They'll simply do their jobs and engage in customer transactions, rather than attempting to build a relationship between the customer and the brand.

Another danger that companies face in today's world is that internal memos that exposes behaviour running counter to external advertising and positioning, are very likely to end up on the internet. Posting of such notices on the Internet frequently look like a case of someone trying to take revenge. But if a customer is looking for a reason to stop doing business with your company, such information may be enough to push them to a decision to consider another supplier.

If your clients are business-to-business customers, these types of Web attacks become even more significant. Business customers like to deal with transparent, stable, and trustworthy suppliers who will be around for a long time. Fights conducted on the Internet do not present a picture of internal stability!

People and Their Behaviours are the Differentiated Advantage

The one thing that an business has — that no other company has — is its people. These employees, each one of them a unique individual, deliver brand promises through their behaviour. Since it's a lot more difficult to imitate staff behaviours than it is to copy functional attributes of service offerings, it's a very good idea to hire the staff most inclined to engage in the behaviours that are aligned with your brand values and promises.

Certainly researchers have pointed out for some time that customer retention tends to move in the same direction as staff retention. If staff leave in large numbers, it's very likely a business will suffer a high degree of customer churn. When staff is inclined to stay, however, most businesses enjoy higher customer retention rates as well.

Best Service Practices to Get the Most From Your Internal Team

Because internal customer service dramatically affects external branded service deliver. Internal customer service must be paid attention to in the same way that attention is paid to external service delivery. While not exhaustive, there are "best practices" to make it more likely your front-line staff will deliver the type of service that will reinforce your brand position.

- Set the tone about internal staff behaviours in your staff orientation programmes. Don't skimp on training your staff when they first arrive. Make sure your orientation programmes contain a substantial discussion of how people are expected to behave towards each other inside the organisation. Sell the idea of "inside" affects "outside."

- When you conduct service delivery programmes, make sure the topic of internal and external customers is covered. Most people understand this, but placing special emphasis on the idea of the internal customer in your training programmes drives the point home that you are serious about this concept.
- Spell out your mission, vision, and company culture. Make sure that expectations about internal behaviour is covered in one of these statements. Your company culture description could include a statement such as, "We believe that our paying customers, on whom we are dependent for our financial survival, are but one among several customers with whom we interact. All these customers, whether internal or external, respond better when we offer the best service to reinforce our brand position."
- Build a culture that emphasizes appreciation. Very few people hear the words, "Thank you," too much. Even simple tasks that we perform for each other side the organisation are worthy of at least a simple thank you. And some tasks are deserving of celebrations.
- Encourage people to break the chain of command and go to a higher level if colleagues are not performing tasks in such a way so that the "paying customer" can best be served. Perhaps Human Resources can get involved in such a task. Without a place to go, employees who are not getting the service they need from their internal providers will simply allow bad service delivered to external customers.

Service — Your Brand in Action

Service (the way staff take care of consumers and the way staff take care of each other) is a picture of a brand in action.

This requires that you:

- know exactly what the brand experience is you wish to create for your external customers
- identify what this experience will look like as it is delivered from one employee to another and from one department to another
- assess all your internal processes and see if any long-standing regulations or behaviors interfere with your employees being able to deliver your brand promise

- evaluate your managerial style to determine if the way your managers communicate, delegate, and empower supports frontline staff in their ability to deliver your brand promises

Once the face of your service experience to consumers is matched with the manner in which staff helps each other to complete tasks, then a positive, multiplying affect occurs. The focus on service delivery to customers can then be driven in the same way throughout the entire organisation.

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