

Sell Phony

By Stuart White
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I was sitting twiddling my thumbs in the Mascom waiting hall last week Sunday morning, where just one staff member was on duty to attend to at least 8 queuing people. There were some other employees there sitting at terminals but though at the front office, they were clearly doing back office work and well adept in blanking out the waiting masses. I eventually approached one of them asking why they were not serving only to be told that service staff work shifts and the others would be on duty at 11 – not much comfort to me at 10.30 in the morning, having already been waiting more than long enough. Of course when the 11 o'clock shift 'started' there was a good 15 minute unproductive delay before they were ready to help customers, ie actually begin work. Ok, I am used to bad service but when I was forced to sit looking straight-on to the full-size poster proclaiming 'Botswana's No. 1 Network Because Of You'. it was like a red rag to a bull. So if Mascom is Number 1 because of me (and believe me my monthly bill is significant), why aren't the staff behaving like it? Why in person am I feeling sidelined, ignored and wholly unappreciated?

It's easy to come up with clever customer-service slogans and put them on advertising posters but not nearly as easy to show appreciation the real way – by deeds, not weasel words. Why is it that not one member of staff looked me in the eye, paid any attention to me or showed any concern for the length of time I had to wait. No apology at any stage, just jaded employees with an attitude that suggested that I was an interruption to their work as opposed to its purpose.

Marketing departments should work hand-in-hand with service departments when they formulate service commitment statements and frontline staff should understand the need to heed the words under promise and over-deliver. When you raise the customers expectations with a commitment to service excellence then you fail to live up to it constitutes a breach of promise. Such deception leaves them feeling short-changed and hurting . And when you're hurt you want to lash out and take your business away. Often the only reason that we don't is because as consumers we are lazy but a wee bit of coaxing on such days and you could flip to another service provider faster than a speeding bullet.

So as I sat there fuming I thought, what is wrong with the training here? Where do we fail to get the message across to service providers that the customer experience is what it's all about? The Mascom people were pleasant enough, I guess, when I finally did get served but they missed the urgency component of customer service and the ability to see further than the one person standing right in front of them. There was just no sensitivity to the customer experience. No apology to the people who needed to be served and certainly no embarrassment from the staff about making the customers wait an extra 15 minutes whilst they got organised for their shift, much less any concept that maybe they should arrive a quarter of an hour earlier to allow for preparation time.

Of course I know what the problem is and it's not rocket science. Management just needs to do 3 simple things; 1) Set the standard and set it high ie. clarify that this is how we expect the customer experience to be; 2) teach people how to deliver the standard and 3) measure and monitor it. It really is blindingly simple. But even at management level we forget. We forget the essence of the job, we forget about the customer because we are too busy with meetings, processes, systems, deadlines and all the other operational stuff and always at the expense of providing good customer service. Too many managers never make time to go front-of-house and see for themselves how the mission statement and advertising mantra are being put into practice. Then of course there's another element and that's motivation. If we don't keep employees energised about what they have to do and excited about doing it, they too forget the purpose and go into routine mode – just going through the motions and getting by with the bare minimum..

But more than anything management needs to put the right people in the jobs in the first place. Not one of the Mascom people appeared naturally good at the customer service thing; yes, they were knowledgeable about their jobs and working the computer – that was obvious - but unless they care intrinsically about pleasing people, systems and processes, though necessary, mean nothing to me.

It goes all the way back to recruitment, I'm convinced – you can't train a nice attitude if it's not part of someone's fundamental personality. In interviews, management needs to look for confidence, poise, eye contact, warmth and an ineffable 'vibe' that says that a candidate will do the business whilst looking after the needs of the customer. In training, we need to emphasise our own everyday experiences as a customer and instruct staff to put themselves in the customer's place. People want to feel that someone's there, on their side and looking after them. The key to good service is simply getting into the customer's head and knowing what they want – that's what empathy is all about.

Anyway, at the end of my Mascom service experience, sitting looking at that damn poster, I thought yeah, you're right - if you are Number 1 it must be because of me, cos it certainly wasn't anything to do with you!

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