

One minute excellence: The Pathway to Breakthrough Customer Service. A Review

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Abstract

The paper discusses the key strategies to breakthrough customer service. The paper also endeavors to highlight, first that the only way to “wow” the customers and have a durable relationship is through one minute excellence. A 21st Century philosophy which postulates that in this era of maintaining symbiotic type of relationships with customers, we need personal “WOW”, to abandon the old paradigm of treating customers as second class citizens, to customer “WOW” which results in customer focused culture. The paper further discusses service experiences by marketing practitioners including personal excellence experiences by the researcher right in the delight arenas.

Key Words: One minute excellence, Pathway, Breakthrough, customer, focus, service, fumigation, networking, net weaving, Boma.

Introduction

“If you are good to your customers, they keep coming back because they like you, when they like you, they tend to spend more because they are delighted, when they spend more you tend to treat them better and the circle starts again.” (Sewell cited in Gummesson 2002). Peters (1995 cited in Kotler 1997) postulates that customers are appreciating assets of the organization. The best way to engage, keep and retain customers is to go out of the ordinary and “WOW” them. The paper seeks to give a practical guide and solution based approach in handling customers especially in high contact service encounters.

One Minute Excellence

A concept borrowed from Peters (1994), One Minute Excellence is the total abandonment of being an average performer and stick out of the growing crowd of look alikes.

Peters (1994) postulates that, better fail with flair in pursuit of something neat and to stay on top of intertwining relationships with your customers, we need personal 'WOW'.

Saravanja,(2011p2) brings in a very interesting dimension when we pursue WOW ,where he says "every great success ,in business or in your personal life ,begins with a dream...But the road to reality is full of obstacles. When everything in your life goes wrong and the barriers in your way seem insurmountable, you will face a tough choice between giving up and persevering...but accept that obstacles are there to make you stronger..."

How to achieve "WOW"

The researcher, in his opening remarks, whenever he is conducting lectures at the Midlands State University, would say, "I want to be the best lecturer in the department of marketing management" and judging from resumes from satisfied "raving fans" the researcher is almost there and can still improve. Just the same as you, from this second you can quit below excellent work, you can say "never again will I do shoddy service" and yes to customer "WOW". Saravanja,(2011) postulates that to achieve excellence a person has to dream and your vision will become a reality. He goes on to say that awaken your potential knowing that the power to persevere is within you, page2.

It does not matter wherever you are, a security guard, a secretary, a library assistant or in any high or low contact service points, for your own future's sake, not because there is insurmountable pressure from your immediate boss or other superiors, you decide and have conviction in your mind set, a matchless standard for customer service. Surely at first the road will be bumpy by being clumsy and confused at first, getting a lot of it wrong, braving a barrage of ridicules by your peers for trying to "curry" favours from the superiors by trying to stick out of the ordinary. Do not be discouraged because these are echoes from the naysayers who are always there to frustrate other peers who try to do the same things but differently.

To be a breakthrough customer service practitioner, Peters (1994 p2) says "Simply picture yourself, even if it is a very fuzzy picture as the greatest customer service practitioner ever in your area and start acting accordingly." You can improve this through among other things, reading up books on service excellence, can go to various service delivery companies to benchmark your efforts and keep doing so to maintain your "glow and tingle"(just as an athlete who does all it takes to perfect the running skills) until the day you call it quits.To stay on top of this "fermenting global brew" we require people to paddle like never before,will require again personal and corporate WOW and the renewal thereof,(Peters,1994).

Underpinning the importance of excellence, Saravanja, (2011p9) posits that “excellence breeds success. Many centuries ago, Aristotle spoke about excellence as not an act but a habit. Excellence is developed by changing your mindset and approaching every single task with care ,diligence and rigour” .He further states that excellence is about exceeding the expectations of those you interact with,suprising them,amazing them and loving them.It is attention to small things ,about running the extra mile and about striving for perfection.Stamp your work with excellence and success will follow.Say no to mediocrity and do not accept second best because these are the number one enemy of excellence.(Saravanja,2011).

The above may sound weird but it is achievable. The first 99.9% of getting from where you are to where you have not been is to invoke a great alchemy of great vision, determination and zeal to do it and not to compromise, no matter what sort of road blocks those around you including closest friends my erect. The following helps you to traverse through the bumpy but in the end gold paved road right into an exciting future:-

- Keep your sprits high through these topsy turvy and inevitable storms.
- Learn something new every day for service quality and customer “wow”, is but a continuous process. Imai (1996) calls it ,the Kaizen approach.
- Go for the glow, ego stroke your customers in terms of your service par excellence for what holds you also holds for your boss. Schwarzkopf (1992) says that when soldiers score victories in the battle front, it is the generals who get the greatest praise.
- Once the fire is lit then assume you have arrived and never look back or do anything below excellence, no matter how trivial it is because that is inconsistent with your new found service quality persona.
- Honor your errors and be accountable to them as these form the launch pad for future improvement in terms of customer service.

Customer Focus

The customer centric perspective holds that the external customer is the centre of gravity and the concept of the customer being an appreciating asset of the organization has been extended beyond satisfaction of the external customers alone, but including employees. Buchanan and Company (1990) suggest that, there is a strong link between customer retention and employee retention. The survey carried out revealed that 14% of customer leave because their complaints were not resolved satisfactorily. Ross (1993) emphasizes that if services to internal customers are shoddy it is likely that the translation of the same culture to the external customers would be the same. Unless internal customer relationships exist, employees will not understand the importance of how their jobs affect others in the service value

chain. There are two elements that are crucial to service success, that is, good people and good systems. Good people need to be supported by and work within good systems. The challenge is that one needs to deal concurrently with the two if you hope to improve long term service quality. Berry(1981cited in Ahmed and Rafiq,2003) supports Ross (1993) when he says that "... just like external customers, internal customers desire to have their needs satisfied."

The logic behind this is that, by satisfying the needs of internal customers, an organization should be in a better position to deliver the quality desired to satisfy external customers. Ahmed and Rafiq (2003) postulate that, communication is an indispensable activity in the functioning of all processes but highly critical in cross functional ones.

Service Fumigation

Services, failures are bound to happen due to complexity and the nature of services. The company must put service fumigation strategies in place to deal with these situations. Naturally, customers who are dissatisfied in the first place but experience a high level of service "ventilation", may ultimately be more satisfied than in the first place.

The following are the effective service ventilation strategies:-

- An apology – by honoring your wrongs and apologize
- Compensation – by replacing or your money back concept to defective items.
- Fail safe – doing the right thing first time all the time (Crosby 1984)
- Empathy – Putting yourself in the shoes of your customers so as to be identified with their needs and aspiration.
- Follow up – After having applied any of the above strategies, follow-up shows that you care for your customers.

Networking and net weaving with customers

Service providers are defined by close and long lasting relationships. Gitoma (2006) in his relationship rule says, "The more you do for your customer, the more they will do for you. The more you do for them the more you mean to them and the more importance you will have their lives" hence the rule of the more the more p39.

Attentiveness

The research conducted by Forum Corporation cited in Peters (1994) says that 70% of lost customers hit the road not because of price or quality issues but because they do not like the human side of doing business with the service provider. This takes us to a story by poet named Mary Oliver cited in Peters (1994) in her touching story called *The Mocking Birds* where she tells of a impoverished old couple who responded to the knock of strangers at their door. The poor folks had nothing to offer the unexpected visitors, only their willingness to be attentive. The unbidden guests turned out to be gods, who surprised their hosts by their attentiveness as the finest gift mere human beings could have made. The story with its small but grand revelation rings loud with most of us though some in contradiction or puzzle, especially in these trying times. Overwhelmed by new everything we hold the gift of human attention, from secretaries who look you directly in the eye rather than conversing with a customer whilst staring blankly at a computer screen surfing the internet or saying "Time Up, I'm going for lunch" when there is a meandering queue of customers waiting to be served or a security guard who stops you by the gate, salutes you and gives you directions to where you are going. It is a question of our conviction. Deming (1996) sarcastically says "change or die but there is no need to change as getting out of business is not compulsory."

The following extracts have far reaching revelations in terms of service quality.

Tired but no fears – The Lakeland Hospital Experience.

A company called Lathrop describes of a veteran nurse employed in a patient focused operation. She notices the differences between a normal and a busy and stressful day. When things are really hectic, she goes home more physically tired than the past but she does not go home and cry. That is what happened in the old world, when the work load become overwhelming, she could just get frustrated, spending much of her day on the phone, trying to get other people to do things her patient needed. Eight hours of bickering, cajoling, screaming and even stretching with the truth when necessary were not rewarding. Now even if she has to hurry between tasks, she and her partner can still get everything necessary done and they have the discretion to defer non essentials. Best of all, the patients see and appreciate her efforts,(Peters,1994).

NB Care pairs are two person teams, a nurse and a technician trained as multi-skilled practitioners performing tasks that used to involve a dozen of people. Most of care pairs do not mind work, they also minimise patients casualties. They go home physically tired but without tears. Today's turbulent and tumultuous

environment requires instant response to customer needs. The crux of the matter here is that care pairs are more dedicated and efficient in delivering service quality to the customers that having more employees who spend time giving each other excuses for not attending to patients there by compromising service quality

The Virginia Azuella's Service Par Excellence at Ritz Carlton Motel – San Francisco USA

She is a hotel sweeper who won the most difficult to win, the Baldrige quality award for being the best hotel sweeper in 1992. The hotel gives the workers including very juniors the autonomy to make decisions and to spend money on the spot to fix a customer's problem. Virginia Azuella had the autonomy to spend up to US\$2000 of company funds to solve a customer's problem. The question is to us as managers or leaders do we give our employees the leeway to strategize and innovate to deal with this crazy environment? When employees are given the autonomy to make decisions in service delivery it is easier to navigate the complexity of services there by giving customers memorable experiences in terms of service quality.

The Boma Restaurant Experience at Victoria Falls Safari Lodge-Zimbabwe

The researcher gives his memorable experience at this restaurant in Victoria Falls during the third annual Marketers convention in 2011 and is therefore speaking from inside the box. To be quite honest I had visited Victoria Falls on countless occasions, but I had never visited this restaurant. It was one evening on 14th of October 2011 when myself and two colleagues from Midlands State University were invited for an evening with a difference at the Boma restaurant by our former students. We hesitantly agreed believing that it was the same old service like anywhere else in Victoria Falls and expensive too. We arrived at the restaurant at 7 o'clock and as we were walking lackadaisically towards the entrance, there was a bus parked by the entrance and I was attracted by the signage written on it which read "the Boma, place of eating, Victoria falls". As we walked in, we were greeted with a traditional ambience where we were given African attires called SARI to put on. As we continued walking, one guy perhaps a "painter" requested to "paint" us on our chicks, We quickly agreed and when we finally reached the reception, we had already been booked as per their tradition and we were taken by one of the waiters who was dressed in the Boma restaurant corporate colours to our table where we were given "ground" rules. "Welcome to the Boma restaurant, your waiter tonight is so and so and here at the Boma we do not limit food" neither do we limit drinks, enjoy yourselves. He took our order for drinks and before

even the drinks were served, we were treated to traditional peanuts to wet our appetites. As we were enjoying our drinks, our starters were served in a small and traditional three legged pot. The food was self service, believe you me, there was everything, from game meat to anything vegetarian. Whilst we were enjoying our meals a "traditional healer" not to be outdone came in to entice us to buy his concoction of hybrid traditional beer and on the other end traditional dancers were busy entertaining guests and it's a must that everyone dances. A whole mutton carcass was being roasted by the fire, remember its self service. After we had it all we were taken on a photo session around the restaurant which is partitioned according to the local area chiefs and fifteen minutes or so after, we were given a DVD of our experience and we were escorted outside to our car. The waiter asked us "how was your experience at the Boma", I quickly interjected and said "it was a WOW".

Lessons learnt

- WOW. There was excellent food variety at the Boma
- Hearty. The Boma restaurant made the ambience more joyous and refreshingly human.
- Lively. From ground rules, traditional dance group to traditional healer's experience a ah it's an experience of a life time.
- Beyond WOW. The Boma restaurant does not WOW the customers, it redefines your experience as a way of life.

Conclusion

Customer WOW is the gold paved way to breakthrough customer service and through one minute excellence, you can be the best customer service practitioner from this second. Because your customers are happy and they value your services no matter how meandering the line is, you will go home tired but without tears – the Lakeland Hospital experience. Customer value is not a journey to a fixed destination but a continuous process, hence, you can 'wow' your customers right in the delight arena. In relationships, Gitoma (2006) says that it is not who you know (networking) who matters most, but who also knows you in the relationship building process (netweaving). Therefore the more you know your customers the more they have a personalized relationship with you hence the rule of the more the more. In this world of breakthrough customer service it is your personal intuition, your gut feeling that gives you the competitive edge. Successful people defy the odds and learn from the future and they would rather make a decision than a perfect decision when its too late.

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