



Service Excellence – Lip Service or World Class Service?

Without a shadow of a doubt, every Contact Centre is driven to stretch its boundaries to provide the best service that is possible to the client – regardless of whether this is an internal or external client. But what does this mean? How do we know that the service that we are providing is what is actually needed or appreciated by the client?

Every benchmark survey that is conducted measures the Contact Centre on multiple criteria including, % calls answered within xxx seconds, % abandoned rate, first contact resolution, average answer time, average handling time and unfortunately, not often enough, cost per contact.

But does this give us an indication of how we are actually performing? How do we know if we are providing Excellent Customer Service? How do we measure up against other similar Contact Centres?

So what defines Customer Service Excellence or “World Class Service”?

According to the Independent Contact Centre Consultants Association in South Africa, to be recognised as a Mature, World Class Contact Centre, you need to meet all three of the following criteria:

01 - Aligned and Integrated Strategies

Fully aligned with and supportive of the organisation’s core business strategies and operations.

02 - Operationally, meets specific standards

Achieve a better than 85% compliance with clearly specified standards as defined by the organisation, by internal and external customer expectations or by specific industry, statutory, regulatory or contractual requirements. (e.g. SABS Contact Centre Standards)

03 - Benchmarked against similar operations:

Benchmarked – at least on an annual basis – against National, Regional and International ‘same-sector’ and similar non-competitive contact centres.

Achieve at least an averaged 85% score against those Key Performance Indicators that are internationally recognised to comprise ‘Best Practice’ for a contact centre operation of the same or closely similar type.

Here are 8 steps to meet the Service Excellence and World Class Contact Centre Criteria

1. Staff engagement, comprehensive understanding and buy in

Ensure that service standards are integrated into the business and involve all staff in the process of development. Staff must be fully on board with the corporate culture and need to be working in a culture of trust, not a culture of blame or fear. If small mistakes are made, present them as an opportunity to learn rather than point a finger. Mentoring and coaching should be implemented throughout the organisation enabling staff members to learn from those more experienced

than them also ensuring a consistency of approach.

Organisations that have successfully implemented a culture of Customer Service Excellence fully recognise the value of employee involvement in both designing and driving change.

People, and particularly front-line people, need to know that the organisation means what it says and they need to feel that they are a part of the organisation and their efforts and skills are recognised.

Good human resource management is essential. Integral to any effective service culture are recruitment processes, career development planning, performance management and employee reward systems. It is through rewarding accomplishments in service delivery that employees will begin to understand the importance of Excellent Customer Service and the organisation's commitment to excellence.

Customer Service Excellence is also reliant on providing excellent service and support to the employees in the organisation. The transformation of an organisation from a good customer service provider to an excellent customer service provider depends on the people who are providing that service. The difference between delivering ordinary and extraordinary service is in the hands of those who represent your organisation, your customer facing staff. Enthusiasm, loyalty, or devotion can't be forced on people. It only happens when employees understand the reasons

behind, agree with and buy into the culture of Customer Service Excellence to make it inherent in the organisation. The levels of customer service provided by an organisation are directly dependent on the strength of the organisation's internal leadership and the ability of the organisation's leaders to foster a culture of Customer Service Excellence and gain commitment to that culture throughout the entire organisation.

2. Analysis, recognition and rectification of service 'gaps'

It is vital to engage in an exercise to analyse the service gaps and implement rectification plans to reduce the gaps in areas such as:

- Customer expectations and management perception of customer expectations
- Customer expectations of the service and their perception of the customer service performance

It is wrong to assume that raising current service targets will lead to an improved service. Customer expectations are not always in line with an organisation's service standards. It could be that achieving the target of answering the telephone within four rings instead of eight is not important to customers but it places immense pressure on staff at the point of service provision. It is therefore imperative that customer expectations are thoroughly understood prior to setting out any standards aimed at improving the customer experience.

Also remember, if you haven't got the information the customer requires when she gets through to you it really doesn't matter how quickly you answered the phone.

When a service provider understands how the customer will measure the service experience - in the context of what her expectations are, it is then possible to identify ways of meeting these expectations and even managing them to a certain extent. Customer expectations have a pivotal impact on customers' perceptions of quality and their ability to be satisfied. If a service provider overpromises, then customers' expectations are raised too high and as a result, customers will perceive they are receiving lower quality services or will be less satisfied. Wherever possible under promise and over deliver. In that way you will be better equipped to delight your customers by far exceeding their expectations.

3. *Development and transparency of a Customer Service Strategy and Standards*

Develop a Customer Service Strategy including Mission and Values, linked to a Customer Service Standard and Customer needs. All levels of leadership and all employees must be committed to delivering the promised service to customers. If every area of the organisation is committed to delivering on the same set of standards then consistency of service will be achieved. A consistent service is one of the keys to delivering excellent customer service.

The Customer Service Standard should clearly set out the purposes and priorities of an organisation. In addition to spelling out the standards of service customers can expect, it should:

- ensure that any standards set are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound)
- tell customers how to comment, complain or compliment
- be clear on how customers can contact the organisation and get further information
- make sure that the information is accessible and easy to understand
- explain how an organisation is planning for further improvement
- assure customers that they will receive a fair service

It is important that all areas within the organisation should be involved in the development of the Standards – thereby gaining their buy in to the process.

4. *Ownership*

It is very important to manage both the good and the bad feedback from customers. While managing the quality of the service is important, the management of service failures is essential. The organisation must monitor the service processes to continuously identify problem areas, implement rectification plans and learn from the experiences.

One of the definitions of a complaint is “An expression of dissatisfaction whether justified or not”.

Complaints need to be recognised and managed through to Customer Satisfaction.

So have an open policy on complaints where it is easy for customers to complain if they need to. Complaints are often the most useful form of feedback.

Provide training to all staff at all levels in the organisation on the complaints handling process across all levels of the organisation.

Educate employees on the benefits of effective complaints handling as well as the best methods of complaints handling. Provide employees with the tools and confidence to handle difficult customers calmly and rationally

Ensure that you have the channels to process different forms of complaint. Ensure that no channel of complaint - in person, by telephone, by mail, by email or website - has priority over the others. No matter what form a complaint to the organisation arrives in it should be dealt with in the same efficient manner.

Log and track the progress of complaints. Keeping track of complaints and their outcomes will ensure that every complaint is dealt with. It will also provide useful information to enable the organisation to not only learn from the mistakes made but also to learn which methods of dealing with particular complaints are the most effective.

5. *Consistency across the business*

Ensure consistency of Customer Service throughout the business - front office, reception, switchboard, retail outlets etc. Too often customer service quality fluctuates between retail outlets, branches, offices or departments and this can create real challenges in maintaining a reputation for excellence.

A key to achieving consistent service across the whole organisation is strong internal communications linked with a well-established induction, training programme and culture that encourages empowerment, while at the same time sets and adheres to standards, processes and procedures. Making an effort to praise good practice and knowledge sharing is invaluable, as is regularly revisiting systems, procedures and policies to ensure they are up to date and relevant.

Implement a high-impact customer service training programme, supported by clearly defined Customer Service Standards, coaching staff members to ensure that they understand the expectations of customers and senior managers. If employees are unaware or unsure of what is expected of them, delivering to unknown expectations can be challenging!

6. **Exploit Technology**

Many organisations see automation as the key to delivering better service at a lower cost. Services are centralised into a single point of contact, automated self-service options are implemented to improve customer convenience and reduce the cost of headcount. Voice

activated and internet portals allow customers to log their own interactions and find their own resolutions for problems or obtain information regarding their queries.

However, technology can also be detrimental to customer satisfaction. Customers still have a need to speak to a human to ensure that their problem will be handled efficiently and effectively. When systems are implemented, a balance needs to be put in place to ensure that the customer receives a high level of service conveniently and quickly. Customers do not want to go through multiple telephony options - press 1 for Sales, 2 for Finance. They want and expect to get to someone who can assist as soon as possible. Unacceptable call or email answering times can be a killer to an organisation trying to retain customers. Done well, CRM is a powerful tool for driving customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and plays an important role on Corporate profitability.

7. *Sustainability*

Management must want to create a service-oriented organisation. Short term financial and strategic gains and a lack of vision at Executive and Management level are two of the biggest issues in preventing the

Debby is an Independent Contact Centre and Customer Service Consultant and has been working in these areas for the past 22 years. Her primary focus is the setting up of new Contact Centres as well as re-engineering those that are ailing and in need of attention. Debby works with organisations to identify potential or existing problem areas and provides and implements solutions in the people, process, technology and facilities areas. Debby is also a member of the [Independent Contact Centre Consultants Association ICCCA](#).

Contact **Debby** Triskel Consulting Contact Centre and Customer Service Specialist. Cell:+27 (0) 82 336 6693 Direct Line:+27 (0) 11 704 5589 Email: triskel@mweb.co.za Web www.triskel.co.za

development of a culture of Customer Service Excellence. It is essential to have strong leadership from the top setting out and living the values of the organisation, communicating these to others, and then galvanising everyone's efforts around the same objectives.

8. *Benchmark, monitor and measure performance*

Through the collection of data, it becomes possible to highlight areas that are not as efficient as they should be and this could be hampering service to the customer. Regular auditing provides this information which in turn provides a tool for continuous improvement.

So are we serious about creating a Customer Service Excellence programme or do we just pay lip service to the concept. **Being serious means taking steps to make the changes in the organisation and the best way to start is by undertaking a benchmarking and auditing of the Contact Centre and Customer Service divisions - understand where there are problems before trying to implement a solution. The return on the investment of an exercise of this nature is enormous to the organisation – in customer as well as staff retention and loyalty.** All it needs it that one first step towards Customer Service Excellence and World Class Service.