



Public Sector Reform Column



AT YOUR SERVICE

Toady, we live in a global environment that offers a universe of choices from a multitude of sources. Globalisation will bring new players into the region who will give top quality service, appreciation and recognition to what has been referred to as the age of the “Vigilante Customer.”

The concept is very simple to understand. Vigilante customers are not dangerous as their name suggests. They just want good old fashioned service, value, convenience, choice and plenty of attention, which is why strong customer service and product quality are the competitive advantages of today. Whether an organisation is a private company or a public sector department, this concept applies to all and vigilante customers have to feel appreciated and special.

Exceeding Expectations

An organisation can not exist without customers. If you have customers you have customer service. Everybody talks about the importance of good customer service, but still too many persons do not ‘walk the talk’. The reason for this is that they have failed to recognise that good customer service on its own is no longer enough. Service has to be superior and exceed customers’ expectations. Consumer choices are forever growing and this situation makes customers very powerful. In the private sector, customers are discerning about how they spend their dollars and cents and with whom they spend them. In the public service, they are critically responsive and demand transparency and higher levels of service for their tax paying dollars.

However, what remains universally true of both sectors is that customers perceive the quality of service they receive as the most critical factor informing their judgement.

Challenges in Improvement

The Office of Public Sector Reform (OPSR), since its inception, has allocated several resources, both human and financial, to Ministries and Departments to facilitate enhanced service levels through the better use of technology and people. The office has realised the potential in better management of customer service to improve customer satisfaction. This will make way for more confidence in public services. OPSR has responded to the customer challenge by:

- Investing heavily in staff training programmes;
- Collaborating with other Ministries and Departments;
- Employing the services of dedicated service trainers to exclusively increase the customer service skills of departments; and
- Promoting customer service and complaints procedures and systems.

Key to Success

Exceeding customer expectations can present challenges and problems at the best of times. Organisations must maintain the ability to give customers what they want and need constantly and consistently. If an organisation is to compete in a truly customer oriented manner, it needs to focus its business functions towards satisfying the individual needs of customers internally and externally. Organisations need to critique their businesses processes to determine the levels of customer friendliness, commitment from staff and customer dialogue. Consideration must be given to how the organisation conducts itself and how each part of the organisation interacts and works with the other. It is also paramount for an organisation to take a critical look at how it interacts with and how it influences the perceptions of its external customers.

Customer Friendliness

Customer friendly business processes make the customer feel good about doing business with the organisation. Business processes should assure the delivery of timely, competitive and quality products and services. These processes only become customer friendly when they are

streamlined to suit the needs of customers and ensure the timely delivery of services. Any part of a process that does not add value to the internal and external customer should be omitted. These processes represent the core functions of the business and need to be managed and appraised on a continuous basis.

Employee Commitment

Staff commitment begins when a vision is effectively communicated, understood and shared by every individual in the organisation. This commitment is supported by policies that clearly state how individuals should treat internal and external customers. Commitment will only be achieved when employees are totally focused on meeting the needs of customers. In order to do this, they must be trained to know who their customers really are; exactly what they need and know what more they can do to exceed customer expectations. OPSR sensitises Ministries and Departments that staff who deal with external customers on the front line are the faces and voices of the public service. Customers will base their perceptions of the public service according to how they are treated by front line staff.

Customer Dialogue

Customer dialogue is true for both internal and external customers as it refers to how an organisation knows the wants and needs of customers. It is the method used to assess customer satisfaction aimed at fulfilling customer needs and wants. Customer dialogue means listening to customers and in order to listen, organisations need to set the scene for dialogue through the use of a variety of tools such as, focus groups, surveys and one-on-one conversations. Internal customer dialogue is achieved by establishing mechanisms that provide identification of how these needs are met. These mechanisms include among other things, proper measurement, monitoring and feedback tools.

In Future

This is a great time to be alive and in business, especially if we are armed with knowledge, the drive to succeed and an open mind. With all these characteristics, and fulfilling the above criteria, we can begin planning our business strategies that will bring us challenge, fun, revenue, profit and more importantly happy customers.

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