

## **Managing your reputation**

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**41st Autumn Conference - 7th/8th October 1996**

### **The Status Quo**

You run a successful business. Competition is tough but, with a lot of effort on the part of your sales team, you're maintaining your sales targets and winning new customers. You know your company inside out and you have a clear idea of what its values are and how the outside world perceives your organisation. You don't get that many complaints from customers and those that do come in seem to be fixed easily enough. You even have a corporate statement which outlines the company's policy on the quality of its service, so that's OK. Everything is in place.

Of course, you do still lose the odd customer. That's par for the course, though, and only to be expected. On the whole, you're happy with your reputation.

So - what exactly *is* your reputation? The customers' version, that is. Not yours.

No guessing, assuming, or putting words into the mouths of your customers, allowed.

Do you know whether they are deliriously happy with the products and service they receive, moderately satisfied or too idle to do anything about it? Are they looking for an alternative supplier, as we speak, or merely bad mouthing you to other customers? Would they increase their order tomorrow if they could get someone to listen to their requirements? Does anybody in your company know how they feel? And if they do, are they doing anything about it?

It's difficult to manage your reputation if you don't know what it is. So, you do a quick poll of your customers and find horrors you never knew existed. Your survey reveals a litany of complaints ranging from benign neglect and complacency to outright treasonable offenses. Worse, you find that your staff not only knew, but had probably tried to tell someone. Maybe they eventually adopted the 'what the hell' attitude customers know so well. Typically this is embodied in an impregnable barrage of justification, and even criticism, implying that it is all the customer's fault anyway.

The only good news is that you're almost certainly not alone. Other companies have the same problems.

The bad news is that they may be doing something about it and, when they get it right, they may win your customers.

### **Improving Your Reputation**

You can improve your reputation, but it needs a complete change of attitude on the part of everyone in the company, from the Managing Director down. Quite literally, it will affect the whole company.

It demands a willingness to see things from the customers' point of view and a determination to change working practices accordingly. It has to become part of the company philosophy.

It means establishing on-going customer satisfaction and loyalty - and then keeping them. And that involves introducing an active customer services function which can cross every boundary within the company and involve every member of staff.

None of these things can be achieved overnight and the process has to be introduced as a long term strategy. Short term solutions brought hurriedly into play to solve an immediate problem or crisis won't work in the long term.

### **Changing Attitudes**

It is not uncommon for a customer to take second - or even third - place to a manager's perception of departmental order and efficiency and any customer service function is usually relegated to the end of the line after research, design, production, marketing, sales and distribution.

Changing this type of attitude is, undoubtedly, one of the hardest tasks a company can undertake. It is difficult and time consuming, but it can be achieved by a subtle mixture of example, authority and persuasion.

Equally it is all too easy to count the apparent cost of a customer oriented strategy rather than look for its profit potential. There are even times when it is overwhelmingly tempting to wash one's hands of 'difficult' customers, discouraging them from further purchases in the process.

That, however, is to ignore the potential spending power of the individual customer over a period of, say, three or five years. One order lost may not amount to much but the long term spend of any customer is another thing altogether.

Although there are still some companies which consider customer service to be a drain on their resources rather than a contribution to their profitability, it is now generally accepted that it is cheaper and more efficient to retain an established customer than it is to win a new one.

This does not mean to say that any company can afford to abandon its efforts to win new customers - but it does mean that it is less wasteful to keep the ones it already has, if at all possible.

### **Introducing Customer Services**

Internal barriers are anathema to good customer service and the introduction of a customer services function, with its own manager and staff, inevitably spells the demise of the 'departmental' mentality. It is, quite simply, impossible to provide first class customer service if other departments withhold information and assistance. This fact, in itself, is often a tremendous hurdle for staff and managers to overcome. Accustomed to departmental autonomy, they may view the new regime with suspicion if not outright opposition.

A well run customer service team is, however, the *only* practical interface between the customer and the company and it should work with every department at every stage of business.

Properly enabled and backed up by senior management, customer services will:

1. resolve customers' problems
2. provide information
3. demonstrate honesty, integrity and fair play
4. forestall any breakdown in customer confidence
5. react immediately to customers' needs
6. maintain constant contact with customers

So, if you want to gain the edge on your competitors, treat your customers well and gain a reputation for excellence. It isn't easy, but it is profitable.