

4 Rules for Enhancing Customer Experience

Customer Experience Summit '09: A healthy dose of proactive service can go a long way toward forging better relationships.

By Christopher Musico

CHICAGO, April 1, 2009 — At the final day of the Customer Experience Summit here today, morning keynote speakers urged the crowd to continue to invest time and energy into their customer-care efforts, despite the recessionary times leading many companies to trim service costs.

"In a time where there are a ton of cutbacks, the first thing many do is cut into service, which can really impact your customers," stressed John Wells, general manager of Hilton Chicago. "Your commitment here says that even through turbulent times, you are taking a competitive position to benefit customers, which will only help your organizations in the long run."

Continuing the theme of continued persistence and improvement, Wells, along with Dru Phelps, author of *How to Audit Your Performance: A to Z Tools*, dished out four essential rules in their morning address, "Engaging Customer Relationships to Enhance the Quality Experience":

1. Know thy customer.
2. Align internal support.
3. Measure feedback for results-based improvement.
4. Find your success story.

1. Know thy customer. Phelps urged attendees to drill down to each customer's true identity by finding out what attracts good sales opportunities -- what she called The It Factor. She also noted that it's vital to combine both a vision and an action in order to truly foster innovation. "It's not about not technical information, industry jargon, overhead, cost, or slogans," she said. "It truly is your customer, agent, business, and support...[and] understanding their needs and educating one another."

Phelps went on to add that service representatives must understand the law of attraction -- what brings people to the organization for a product or service. She explained that customers value businesses for various reasons:

- * the ability to listen,
- * a known customer experience,
- * ease and access,
- * CRM to enhance contact,
- * being able to recommend a strong brand to others, and
- * satisfaction.

"If they don't know about this, share it with them," she said. "That's the first step."

2. Align internal support. While knowing the customer is essential, Wells said that being able to follow through on the second step -- aligning internal support -- is the "blood and guts" of service. "Tactical skills are needed to embrace the customer," he said. "How do we get to know them? The issue is how to embrace the customer interaction."

At his own hotel, Wells said, CRM stands for "customers really matter." And while he admitted that many have taken the acronym to mean myriad things, the end goal is the same: taking care of the customer. "The service aspect has changed in our industry -- now it [starts] before you arrive," he said. "We're all multitaskers and don't have the time that we used to. We need to provide service before it's even really started."

The danger, though, is that if companies do collect vital information on what customers want before the service officially begins, there had better be followthrough. That, Phelps said, is why business plans must be in place before an enterprise turns to software and solutions. "CRM is a performance-based strategy centered on the customer," she pointed out. "It's not the technology."

3. Measure feedback for results-based improvement. Having a plan in place is vital for the third rule, which is taking the customer feedback -- whether collected on slips of paper or via electronic surveys -- and actually making process improvements as a result. "This is extremely, extremely important because satisfaction is great -- but loyalty is better," Wells said. "Would you rather your spouse be satisfied or loyal? If you don't listen to feedback [from] your customers, you're only as good as you are today -- and then you won't be very good tomorrow."

4. Find your success story. The first three rules culminate in the final one -- finding that true success story you can convey to others. Phelps closed the speech by challenging the crowd of customer service and experience professionals to boost their businesses and their bottom lines. "The last component is change," she said. "Failure points are golden money.... It's time to be proactive and learn a lot so you can 're-win' that customer. Are you playing defense and trying to take care of lost customers? Or will you move on the offensive, and go to loyalty, follow good experiences, and [as a result] follow the green?"