

# It's About Them, Not Us

## SITEL Puts the Customer in the Driving Seat

by Patricia Moore

The customer is king; an adage that's probably been around as long as there have been customers and kings. But is it the reality in today's market - or just another slogan to move CRM software?

When products are uniformly excellent and freely available, business survival becomes a question of keeping the customer satisfied. And for companies wanting to grow the business, keeping existing customers happy is far more cost effective than seeking new ones. But customers are increasingly sophisticated - and demanding. If they are unhappy or feel badly treated by a company, customers will vote with their feet. They will also share their unhappiness with others, and today's communication networks make it simple to let far more people than just your immediate circle know about an experience, good or bad.

But how many companies still pay no more than lip service to the concept of the customer being number one? In spite of mission statements testifying to their customer 'focus', how many businesses still put more emphasis on getting the job done or producing the goods, than listening to their customers and reacting to their comments and concerns? Indeed, how often does this so-called customer focus get any further than the statement on the wall and a general agreement around the board table?

For multi-national company SITEL, customer focus is not enough. The company is pro-actively working to become customer driven, says Steve Barker, Vice President Utilities, New Zealand. "We are building a customer driven culture." Customer focused or customer driven is there a difference? Definitely, says Barker. "Principally, customer



focused businesses think the customer is important. Customer driven businesses know the customer is their business."

SITEL provides contact centre and billing services for Genesis Energy. Three years ago, Genesis Energy decided that their best strategy in a competitive market was to become customer driven. Because the people with whom SITEL deals every day of the year are those calling the Genesis Energy number; effectively SITEL is the voice of the utility company. To the caller, the person at the end of the line who will solve the problem or put in motion the events which will satisfy them, is Genesis Energy. If Genesis Energy was to become customer driven, SITEL had to be as well.

That changed the emphasis, says Trevor Starr, Genesis Energy's customer operations

**"It's about thinking like the customer."**

## Being customer focused is not enough.

manager. “For too long SITEL has advocated Genesis Energy to our customers; our policy, our rules, our products and services. That's what we've asked them to do. But in a customer driven environment we need SITEL to advocate on behalf of our customers to Genesis Energy. For me, being customer driven, is about listening to our customers and understanding what we can do to make them successful and doing everything we can to deliver. It's about them, not us.”

The relationship between SITEL and Genesis Energy is a close one. Starr is based in Hamilton in order to be close to the contact centre where most customer interactions happen. “I meet weekly with the contact centre general manager and am in regular contact with other managers and team leaders,” he says. Starr is also responsible for presenting Genesis Energy to new recruits at the contact centre and gets to hand out compliments certificates and movie tickets to SITEL's front line contact centre staff when a customer has taken time to praise them for service. “I particularly enjoy this and staff seem to get a real buzz from it.”

Barker runs what he describes as 'a very, very operationally excellent business at a transactional level'. “What we are trying to do,” he says, “is build on top of that success and create new opportunities for strengthening the future of our business.” “With Genesis Energy, we have a client which is truly



customer driven,” says Barker. “It has a desire for customers to stay with them for a long time. To do that requires the meeting of expectations for those customers across the board, regardless of how we touch them.” And it is not only about SITEL, says Barker. “It's about the total customer experience. It may be an invoice going out that's accurate, a call-in from a customer, a linesman turning up and meeting expectations. Being customer driven is not just about one single experience, it's about the total customer view of the brand.”



## It's about the total customer experience.

But thousands of customers means thousands of expectations. How can SITEL, or any other enterprise, create a culture that fits all? Barker agrees that perceptions and expectations among their callers differ widely. “Someone who's moving house has a completely different view of the universe from the person who's had their power disrupted and had their life-style taken away from them. They want that lifestyle back. Or if it's a business that's been disrupted they want their business back. What we have done is sit back and say, look, every customer is different but the sorts of things they set out to experience are principally the same. It's really around creating a conversation about how we can create that kind of experience in a general sense, and allow them to be successful.” It's about getting those perceptions right, says Barker. “Making sure that we can, in the future, deliver the sort of experience that really is going to meet a lot of requirements.”

Developing a customer driven culture does not happen as the result of sending out a memo or two. Steve Barker says they knew the steps they had to take and planned a series of workshops with customer service expert Dr Ian Brooks. “First we wanted to take people through what we called a 'conversation for possibility'. But to do this we had to create the opportunity for four hundred plus people to go off and re-experience our business to positively delight people on the way through.” Barker says it was important the exercise was very structured and that the conversation for possibility took people to the point where they understood what was meant when they talked about being customer driven.

The campus at Waikato University was chosen as the venue for the workshops held in November and December last year. The university year had finished and Barker says it was ideal. “Great in terms of peace and quiet, fabulous catering and facilities.” Genesis Energy's retail management team were with SITEL all the way through the planning and staging of the workshops. Members of the team up to senior executive level attended every workshop and their involvement was an important part of the exercise, says Trevor Starr. “Most of us in Genesis Energy are quite removed from the customer. However, our challenge is to line everyone up along the internal customer-supplier chain so that each person has a clear understanding of what they need to do to make our customers successful.”

The workshops seventeen in all were four hours in duration and began with Steve Barker, supported by Trevor Starr, discussing SITEL's business and explaining what they were trying to achieve. Brooks then took over and talked for an hour about the need to become customer driven and what that means. He stressed the differences between customer focused businesses and those that were customer driven. “Getting that point across, about the behaviour sets between the two businesses, to our front-line staff was very important,” says Barker. “We talked in-depth about that and about how customers think.”

To get the customer viewpoint first hand, SITEL invited a cross section of customers to come and share their experiences with the workshops.



## We took our people through a 'conversation' for possibility'.

“Some of these were people who had complained, while others had taken time to write and tell us how they were feeling in both a good and bad sense. The key point was that in our universe we don't often get face to face with our customers.” The reaction of workshop attendees meeting their clients face-to-face was interesting, says Barker. “Some of the experiences the customers shared were good and made us feel very proud about the things we do. Some of them were not so good and that was quite challenging in terms of how we run our business and the sort of experience we create for people. There was massive learning for the people at the workshops in terms of what can go right and what can go wrong for customers.”

Every workshop or training exercise has its eccentric touches. And Steve Barker's 'biscuit' model was the quirky touch introduced at the SITEL workshops. “The model, an orange triangle I call a biscuit, because it looks like a dog biscuit, is a very simple way for us to be able to say are we getting everything in balance. From our perspective that means making sure staff are available, that they know how to behave with a customer and that they actually know what it is they have to do to make their customer successful thinking about it from the customer's perspective.” When contact centre staff think customer driven, says Barker, it should be in terms of those three components. “That they are available for customers, that they know how to behave for the different types of customer experience remembering a customer who's calling regarding a relocation will have a very different perspective to one reporting a fault and that they know how to create an experience the caller will feel positive about. It's about thinking like the customer, not in any other way.”

Discussion sessions following the customer presentations were an important aspect of the workshops. Barker says attendees were asked to consider the customer experiences they had just heard, put themselves in the customer's position and comment on the positive and negative aspects of the experience, matching it against the biscuit model always from the

customer's viewpoint. “It wasn't about what we did, it was about how the customer saw it.” The customer then critiqued those comments. “Generally they felt we were getting the balance right, actually understanding things from their point of view,” says Barker.

The workshops were well received by staff says Barker who noted that as word got around numbers increased. “Positive word of mouth saw the groups getting bigger and bigger, SITEL and Genesis Energy employees, together going through the experience.”

The SITEL customer driven workshops were held at the end of the year to give the company a head start for the next. “What we were trying to do was create an opportunity when we began thinking about 2006,” says Steve Barker. A number of follow-up initiatives are already planned or in place. In March this year SITEL launched an intranet form designed to help contact centre staff in their efforts as customer advocates, and a number of other activities are in the pipeline says Barker. “These include focusing on what the company can do from a cultural perspective to ensure the business is truly customer driven and that we have people who enjoy coming to work and enjoy serving customers.” Plans also include the appointment of a manager to steer the customer driven initiative.

This year is about putting it all into action says Barker. “But first we had to have everyone agreeing this is the right thing to do. We wanted to create a conversation for possibility, and have everyone understand what we were doing and why. It's about making our customers successful. There are thousands of processes and lots of different interconnected parts. But let's make 2006 the year we take action around becoming customer driven.”

In a contact centre environment staff, come and go and SITEL's workshops are not intended to be a one-off. “The workshops must be on-going for new starters,” says Trevor Starr. “They need to think from



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