

The power of touch

Businesses with happy customers are usually successful businesses. Contact points with the customer are key drivers of customer satisfaction. All of this is well known. Knowing and doing are different things, though, and it's much easier to acknowledge a problem than to fix it.

Mobile telecoms has a reputation for high costs and poor service. As usual with widespread myths, it is only partly justified. Service providers have the tricky task of providing mass services while still presenting a human face to their customers. Most of the time, services work well and people use them without thinking. The reputation for high and unfair charging, though is a persistent thorn in the foot.

Naturally, costs are not the whole story. Quality and continuity of supply are also important. When your household electricity supply is interrupted and you have to light candles and mop the floor due to ice melting from the freezer, then your only thought is about getting the supply restored as quickly as possible. Likewise, when on an important business call, or even viewing your favourite soap opera on the train, if the communication link keeps dropping you're likely to start grumbling about your service provider.

Let's say you're at a business conference and are trying to download some information about a competitor. Your phone has just crashed for the fifth time that day. The data link is slow and drops out. Other people seems to be connecting and using their services fine. To make matters worse, you're already in a bad mood because your latest bill was £80 more than you expected, for reasons that were not immediately clear. A threshold is crossed. You stab the short code for customer services into the phone with hostile intent. Ok, nobody is going to die, but you're frustrated and want some way to relieve the pressure.

When answering the call, the customer service agent jibbers something incomprehensible. It's too much to endure, and you launch into a diatribe about your phone, the connection and the recent rise in costs. What is the agent to do about this?

Of course, the only sensible approach is to deal calmly with each problem in turn. Often people contacting their service provider have only one 'foreground' problem, but may have several 'background' problems. When, as in our example, there are several foreground problems, the agent has a serious challenge to defuse the situation and address the problems in a way that is likely to lead to swift resolution.

In our example the agent will ask about the handset - which type, how old, whether problems have been experienced before, doing what, and so on. Collecting this information will not only be the key to decide on how to resolve the problem, but will tend to de-escalate the situation. Assuming, of course, that this is not the seventh time you have called about your clunker of a handset and repeated the same information each time!

It's easy to see how cynicism can set in, on both sides. However, a little bit of personal service goes a long way. Most people are content to receive a mostly anonymous service as long as there are some personal touches when needed. After all, everyone's goal is for services just to work all of the time and consumers feel that they are good value for money.

At the point of contact with the customer, it's important to have something good to say which does not amount to the equivalent of kicking your customer in the head and then handing them an aspirin. "I'm sorry sir we can't rebate the additional £80 on your last bill, there were no reported network issues in your area this morning, but if you sign up to our new tariff then you will receive another 100 minutes per month for only £5 more".

This is where tariff reviews can make the difference. Telling customers that they could save money by moving to a different tariff or add-on is a powerful way to restore trust and to make them feel valued. It does not completely defuse issues related to high charges or poor service quality, of course. But it does lay down a marker that the service provider is looking after their interests, and that they will not be gratuitously overcharged.

It's even more powerful if the service provider can resist the temptation to overtly up-sell at the same time as giving the tariff review. Trust is not easily won, but once gained will yield long-term results. Up-selling messages are ineffective unless trust is present, so there is an order of events to be followed: first reassure customers and win their trust; then make them added-value offers.

Points of contact with customers are rare and precious in mass service environments. It pays to make the most of them to build a relationship, rather than treating customers as sales objects or cost sinks.