

COMMENTARY

Vital to win customers' trust amid evolving wants

Good customer service processes will yield sales and brand loyalty

By REGINA CHUA

THE Internet has led to a borderless global marketplace and a worldwide forum where consumers share opinions about products and services.

In today's world, customers have more options. When they look for a product or service to purchase, they are spoilt for choice, and so are more demanding. They used to base their purchasing decision on the brand itself. Now, they ask a broad range of questions, depending on their exposure to the information on the Internet, social media and what they speculate about.

The change in consumers' consumption habits has changed due to distractions, expectations and influences. Distractions abound due to a borderless global marketplace, where customers have many avenues to purchase products and services, including online shopping and buying through companies' channel partners and franchisees, so it is more challenging to connect directly with customers who used to shop only at retail stores.

Consumers expect more when they engage with brands at the various customer touchpoints such as the retail stores and through customer service call centres. Traditional marketing strategies of customer segmentation, targeting and positioning are not enough. These must now have relevance and context for the customer.

Businesses overestimate their brand appeal and the brand's pulling power. They believe they have the best products and services. But customers want companies to help them justify why their products and services are worth their value.

Since customers do not take a brand name as the authority anymore, companies cannot ride on brand reputations like they used to because customers are influenced by opinions in social media and online communities.

Brands are now perceived as being only as good as their last product or service launched, and have to contend with negative reviews that stay on the Internet.

Today's environment of intense global competition also means companies need to overcome price erosion and differentiate themselves from the competition in a market of simi-

lar products and services. Many companies think that great customer service will increase loyalty, but this is not enough in today's market.

Companies often do not realise that to have a competitive edge, they would need to understand the reasons that ultimately go into their customers' purchasing decisions both today and tomorrow. They can do this by intentionally understanding the customers better, and this is done through face-to-face customer engagement.

Increasing staff effectiveness

THE Firefly model is a framework for purposeful engagement at any customer encounter, universally applicable to both consumer and commercial markets. It is systematic and has structure, and its steps are easy to recall. Each letter in the word Firefly helps create purposeful dialogue:

F: Flex – Adjust yourself towards the person you are speaking to.

I: Impress – Expressing yourself through positive and compatible body language, gestures and tone.

R: Rapport – Break the ice with intentional small talk.

E: Engage – Ask the questions.

F: Flow – Flow your ideas, pitch according to their interest. Align to the person you are speaking to.

L: Leverage – Leverage upon your differences to keep the conversation open.

Y: Yield – Yield to a win-win outcome.

The FIREFLY model increases productivity through the personal effectiveness of companies' employees. It enables job mastery by anyone to engage deeply at all customer service and sales touchpoints. In addition, the customer engagement process easily becomes an unconscious skill and ingrained in employees, increasing employees' personal effectiveness and productivity.

Customer engagement is not only a vital business strategy, it is also the key to sustainable competitive advantage, through premium pricing, continued sales, customers' brand loyalty, insight and feedback on products and services. This is why leading companies have placed customer engagement at the centre of their business strategies.

Given that customers' needs and wants have evolved, the customer engagement strategy cannot just be the 4Ps of marketing based on the companies' perspective and research.

Instead of looking into information such as why the customers purchased their products in the past, companies should find out why the customer would purchase from them now and into the future. They can do that with an intentional dialogue process that can tap into thoughts and feelings of customers.

Consumers are time-starved today due to their busy lifestyles and yet are overwhelmed with information and a myriad of product and service choices.

They crave simplicity. They want to gather trustworthy information about products and services, and confidently and efficiently weigh their purchase options. Service staff would need to understand the customer before making recommendations, and they would need to do it within a very short period of time.

Retail management in consumer products and services today is both complex and time-bound. These conversations with customers and their interactions at different customer touchpoints need to be purposeful, therefore customisation of customer service processes and conversations are important to achieve the desired results of sales and brand loyalty.

Customers who feel connected will find the experience memorable with positive and good memories. Good memories create a lasting positioning in the customer's mind. It is a strategic advantage because customer engagement will lead consumers to follow through on an intended purchase, buy the product repeatedly, and recommend it to others.

From strategy and systems to staffing and shared vision, a deliberate process must be embedded to establish trust with customers, one conversation at a time.

The writer is the founder and managing partner of DD Consulting Pte Ltd and author of Firefly Consultative Engagement



Connecting with customers: Customer engagement will lead consumers to follow through on an intended purchase, and buy the product repeatedly. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG