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Managing customers the right way

By Calyn Yap

Workshop to impart skills on engaging disgruntled customers

Customer engagement remain one of the most neglected aspects for SMEs, and the Distressed Customer Engagement 2011 workshop – which will be held on Dec 8 to Dec 9 at Hotel Istana – aims to change that by training SME personnel to manage customers the right way.

MALAYSIA SMET™ speaks with Discipline Dynamics Consulting Pte Ltd managing partner Regina Chua to find out what distressed customer engagement is and why it is important for SMEs to learn the skill, as a teaser for the upcoming workshop.

According to Chua, distressed customer engagement is the “ability to manage demanding or dissatisfied customers by addressing both their professional and personal needs, and transform the difficult situation from negative to neutral or positive.”

She said: “Customers come with different personality types and it is a competitive advantage for the company to be able to handle upsetting situations without making it worse unintentionally.”

In the workshop, Chua will be sharing her trademark RealFab AC2© techniques, which is a systematic conversational approach that shows one how to satisfy the needs of the customer in both the personal and professional approach while delivering the service or product.

Benefitting from proper customer management

On why distressed customer engagement is important for SMEs, Chua said

that managing customers require one to be adept not only in delivering the service or product but also handle challenging situations.

“While it is easier to handle the former, many SMEs lack the skills to overcome tough negotiators or unreasonable requests. Instead, they lose customers and experience bad word-of-mouth when they focus on the task or get personal and take the customer to task,” she added.

On the other hand, there are many benefits to be gained from proper distressed customer engagement. While customer service is commonly viewed as a soft skill, she said, distressed customer management provides a process within the client engagement to skilfully guide one’s conversational approach so as to anticipate and address the situation professionally.

She further elaborated: “Another aspect of customer management is the inevitable service lapse or the product failure which at times can become a crisis if poorly managed. Hence, while company processes provide a standard approach for handling the defect or customer complaint, the personal needs of the customer must also be well managed so that the perceived experience is positively viewed.”

First steps towards understanding

Chua stressed that in this aspect, it is essential to first understand the personal or emotive needs of a customer, as the

experience cannot be detached from the service or product delivery.

“Hence, the starting point is to put yourself in the customer’s shoes and engage in a consultative two-way dialogue. Companies need to equip their people with the ability to empathise with the customer’s viewpoint, find common ground and be articulate in communicating with tact and purpose,” she shared.

Warning signs are simple to spot, but harder to address, according to Chua. When there is a higher level of customer complaints and customers who demand to speak with the manager, it is evident that there are disgruntled customers who many perceive that the service or product did not meet their perceived expectations.

This is when SMEs should take steps to address the issue before it gets blown out of proportion and ruins the company’s reputation.

A basic step, Chua explained, was to take every customer’s reaction as feedback. “See this as a moment of truth to demonstrate empathy and appreciation for their feedback. Take time to fully understand the situation before providing a solution, then focus on delivering a professional solution with a personal touch, which means ensuring that you do not get angry even when the customer gets hysterical,” she said.

Tips and tricks

When asked on her advice for SMEs in terms of distressed customer engage-

ment, Chua said that customer management is an experience and that one needs to take the good as well as the bad moments.

“Be prepared for nasty customers and unreasonable demands, and train your staff to be skilful in handling the approach of the conversation. Do not just focus on the technical or product issues alone but be conscious of the people’s experience and how your words can impact their decision to continue buying from you,” she imparted.

One of the tips she gave was that customer service personnel should always listen before they speak as most staff may unwittingly think that the right thing to do is to explain and justify the value of the solution. However, Chua said that this leads to the perception that the staff is apathetic and defensive.

“Thus, SMEs have to reframe themselves with a positive mindset that the customers’ disgruntled behaviour is a sign that your product or service is below their expectation. See this as feedback opportunity to understand the situation and improve the outcome.

“Handling distressed customers is a counter-intuitive behaviour as compared to providing good customer service. When customers become upset, staff typically feel threatened and prefer not to deal with the situation by either giving in or giving up. It is not an easy task to handle but the worst customers can be your best lessons for your business. Hence, engage the entire company to embrace both good and bad customer situations to raise the bar for the company,” she concluded.