

Strategies for Achieving Service Excellence in Sales

1. Introduction to Service Excellence in Sales

Competition in the marketplace is focused less and less on product and price, and more and more on service. In fact, as quoted in a frequently heard comment, "Price begins and ends the customer's interest, with the product in between; it is really service that counts." Differentiation is achieved, in large part, through salespeople who provide excellent service to customers. "Service excellence in sales" is soon to become the buzzword for competitive survival for many companies. The role of the salesperson, traditionally seen as largely one of selling, is changing and expanding to encompass the "service role" as well. Sales representatives in the field, because they have frequent contacts with customers, are in a very good position to keep their own companies informed about competitors' successes and problems in the marketplace. They can report on product performance, customer reaction to new product introductions, and customer requirements not currently being met.

A few years ago, the service quality movement centered around internal operations and recognition was directed primarily within the organization. The term, "service," generally carried with it a connotation of support or assistance either within or outside the organization. Then the focus turned to external service followed by the identification and recognition of the sales force as a primary deliverer of service. Many firms began to emphasize this critical role within their organization, even to the extent of including "customer service" as a specific item in the sales representative's job description. Sizable percentages of an organization's activities directed toward improving service are generally spent making sure salespeople are adept and adeptly use customer-related skills. These include listening, understanding, empathy, patience, responding, reassuring, pursuing, and giving a customer what he or she wants. In a word, customer service is expected. And the peril in the service industry is also described in another word, "consumption," which is the easiest thing in the world to turn off. Small wonder, then, that "customer satisfaction" has replaced "customer service" as the primary focus for organizations striving to generate superior customer loyalty. However, from a

customer standpoint, services are still the actions available to customers to help them use the product to its full advantage. In other words, it is the help a business gives its customers before, during, or after they make a purchase.

2. Understanding the Role of Salespeople in Service Excellence

Understanding the role of salespeople and the sales-related processes is of crucial importance for service excellence-related activities. Salespeople are key elements in the success of service excellence strategies. This point becomes clearer if we consider several current social and business traits, such as an increase in entities involved in the offering of service; the growing importance of customer service as an adjustment point for goods and services differentiation; and the major role of salespeople in customer service. Furthermore, salespeople contribute to service excellence in other domains, such as in the preparation of customers for using services and in the consumer learning processes associated with product or service use.

Salespeople's service perceptions are also important, not only regarding the relationship with the customer but also in harmonizing the customer's needs with the firm's capabilities. Their opinions on what can be offered and under what conditions are quite significant. In fact, they often influence customer perceptions more than service blueprints do. Salespeople at retail points contribute to making promotions, advertising, pricing, service, and merchandising work. They send feedback to the company and take part in stock control operations. Their goal is to prepare customers to use their products and services. They provide after-sales service and assist in distributing products. They also build relationships. All of these actions are part of the service. For companies involved in finding and securing new customers for their clients, such as headhunter firms, accounting companies, manpower supply firms, and claim administrators, salespeople's service roles are clearly evident.

3. Key Characteristics of Service Excellence in Sales

In today's rapidly changing marketplace, companies are shifting from a goods-driven to a services-driven business model. The role of the sales force is expanding from that of an order taker to a strategic customer problem solver. The sales force acts as the link between the company and its customers, and is where the delivery of

excellent service and satisfaction is most visible. Consequently, excellence in sales has become very important, both for the company and for maintaining this all-important link. The purpose of this text is to develop a better understanding of how salespeople contribute to excellent sales. Based on qualitative data gathered from salespeople and their managers in eight companies, six key characteristics are identified. For each characteristic, drivers and leveraging strategies are discussed. These can help companies benefit from the contribution of their salespeople, and the sales personnel to deliver more value and become co-creators of this value.

3.1. Empathy and Active Listening

When you match up a sales rep who is an excellent empathizer and listener to a customer's needs, you create an understanding of the customer's pain points. And that's what makes a great salesperson. Customers today are savvy and would much rather do their homework before making a purchase. If your price sounds fair and you can deliver reasonably quickly, it's the human bond that motivates customers to buy! There are a number of things not to do during a sales call: - interrupt the customer - mutter incentives just to stop a complaint - decline a proper request for a return - draw a "line in the sand" to hold the customer to a policy. Empathy and active listening can be exercised not only within your sales and customer service teams toward your external customers, but within your company. This type of listening avoids you the rocky experience caused by "polite listening". In these cases, it is useful to repeat back to the other person, using their words to show you have understood what was said. Practical empathy requires that you listen without judgment, and that you accept the emotions experienced by the customer, and that you are patient while they express them.

3.2. Product Knowledge and Expertise

Expertise is a core contributor to customer satisfaction. Care should be taken when customer complaints flow into the sales area regarding the product and nobody present is qualified to share expert advice. Even the best customer service provided by a warm, friendly, and competent sales assistant cannot make up for an incomplete sale of unsuitable products. Consumers are more knowledgeable and have more product information at their disposal. They are also looking for an expert to provide technical information and recommendations. Product knowledge also ensures confidence and credibility. This does not mean only the basics of each product. Knowledge of new products, changes to existing products, and, importantly, positive customer experiences with the product are essential. Keep in

mind that one positive sales experience is reflected through repeat sales and customer loyalty.

Customers who do not have time to travel to other stores and retailers selling mass-produced items want immediate information on when equipment will be replaced or which companies are better at supplying certain equipment; they are fundamentally seeking expertise. Know your product. The sales team should know all the products in the store or those that are marketed. Have basic knowledge about the use of the article: for whom it is directed, if it is suitable for outdoor use, if it supports any weight, if it requires any maintenance, or whatever. Knowing all the products that interact with the product during the sale may also be relevant. For example, it may be important to know who the manufacturer, importer, or service provider of the after-sales service is to meet the customer's requirements. Try any item. Without first trying the product, do not attempt to sell it because the customer may ask about essential aspects that you do not know. Provide information on the product. If you do not know, look for it to offer the customer complete and transparent information.

3.3. Problem-Solving Skills

A good measure for evaluating the capabilities of current and potential sales staff is to assess their problem-solving abilities. The salesperson must ascertain not only the customer's identification of the problem or issue but also the underlying causes. Often, the customer's statement may touch upon only one aspect of the situation, and the salesperson's inquiry may surface not only that concern but other concerns that must be resolved before a sale can be made. The salesperson must be able to interact with the customer to elicit information and inquire as to what other data are needed. The salesperson should be capable of recognizing the situation as a whole so the complexity of the complete customer concern is understood and resolved. In addition, the salesperson must engage analysis skills to arrive at the solution that best fits the customer's needs. A person with good problem-solving skills is also capable of performing at a high level in answering crucial questions the customer may have. These questions are generally: (1) How would the product best be presented to fulfill my particular need? (2) What are the areas of advantage and potential problems associated with the use of the product? (3) Who else has used the product, and what have their results been? (4) Would I consciously endorse this product to others? These capabilities distinguish the good salesperson from the great salesperson.

4. Building Strong Customer Relationships

Companies often go to considerable lengths to build and maintain good working relationships with their customers, even going so far as to position their sales representatives on the premises and train them to serve like an employee of the customer company, rather than an agent of the supplier. This approach may not be practical for all companies or in all circumstances. Instead, the managers or other representatives of a supplier may visit the customer's plant periodically, perhaps at approximately three-month intervals, in an effort to develop and maintain customer goodwill. In many cases, the supplier will send a small number of people to the customer's facility, with an arrangement such that they become familiar with the customer's operations without actually becoming part of the customer organization.

Many suppliers use advertising media and phone calls to keep the customer informed about service capability and about service supplements that could be relevant to the customer's needs. Most of the suppliers also use the customer as a repository for the latest materials that appear to have relevance to customer operations. By processing the information through a central library or institutional liaison program, the customer is able to ensure broad distribution of materials to people who may benefit from seeing them. To fully capitalize on the supplier's firm, the customer may need to set up guidelines for when it wants to hear from agents of the supplier.

4.1. Effective Communication Strategies

Effective communication represents a critical issue in achieving excellence in service. Communication helps build goodwill and ensures that the customer fully understands the product. It has a direct effect on the customer's perception of equal or better service levels. Good communication is essential at every stage of the sales process. Both standing orders and customer-specific orders need to be discussed and agreed upon with customer teams as changes arise. Changes to packaging, terms of sale, or delivery need to be effectively communicated and recorded in customer files. Effective communication implies listening, not suppressing or ignoring what has been said. Management's job is to motivate individuals and teams to participate in open and honest dialogue. Effective communication first seeks to ensure that everyone has something to say; secondly, that everyone is allowed to say what they want. The effective team is open to all ideas and shares frustrations as

well as successes. Communication links customers and their concerns, needs, and demands to team members' knowledge, experience, and expertise.

Information, advice, knowledge, and expertise are seen as relevant answers. Effective communication is thus seen as ensuring that the customer hears what he or she wants and that company personnel listen to the customer. Customer concerns and ideas often relate to company services, relationships, and value for the service fee charged. These concerns may be internal or external, conscious or subconscious, academic or practical, rational or emotional. Effective communication represents both the logical transference of facts and figures and trust and respect between participants and is thus seen as a journey, not a final destination. Communication requires common ground between customer and company objectives. Both communicate information back and forth on a continual basis. As a customer's priorities change, so too does the level of communication required to maintain the relationship. Corporate business tactics, processes, and procedures need to reflect and provide for changing needs. Mistakes are made when what is needed is not properly communicated and discrepancies between words and actions arise.

4.2. Personalization and Customization

In many transactions, the service provider has some choices as to the way the service is delivered. Personalization is the ability to accommodate individual treatment and recognition of the customer. A customized or made-to-order service product, on the other hand, reflects the specific needs of the customer. This requires not only recognition of the customer but also the ability to respond to the customer's needs in unique or specific ways. Customized services are better able to reflect the needs of individual customers. Such services are more likely to contribute to overall satisfaction. They can also reduce customer waiting time and can increase the likelihood that the customer will continue to offer his or her patronage.

In many large retail organizations, customization of the service product may be facilitated through the use of sophisticated technology, which can support treatment of individual customers as unique persons with specific problems or needs. Such technology can do things such as reducing the amount of time needed for service and providing products that better fulfill the customers' needs or desires; however, this technology is expensive. Even without such technology, however, salespeople must recognize the need for personalization and individual treatment and adjust

their behavior in order to effectively interact with those customers. Providing individualized service means extending recognition and treatment to each customer. Such personalization usually involves offering a greeting and some solicitation of further needs. A jurisdictional agency employee, for instance, might greet each customer by saying "Welcome to the Power Company. Can I help you with a particular concern today?" In a retail department store, a salesclerk might say something like "Good afternoon. Can I help you with anything special?" Merely recognizing customers as they enter the store or walk by the service provider is a beginning, but it is not usually enough to demonstrate commitment to personal treatment. The salesperson must assume certain responsibilities in order to appear that he or she is willing to provide special recognition and treatment. Placing product displays close to the customer, for instance, supports the customer in his wish to see and touch the products he or she is contemplating.

5. Implementing Technology for Enhanced Service Delivery

An area that is experiencing significant change is advanced delivery technology. Here, I want to overview three areas where technology is being implemented for enhanced service delivery and discuss the implications of the use of technology in service delivery. First, in illustrative points, let's define an advanced transportation management system, which entails state-of-the-art hardware and software, such as online scheduling and ordering built into a truck or cargo van, allowing a package delivery courier or food distributor to change route schedules iteratively during a business day in response to real-world events such as late or lost deliveries. Substantively, these changes permit a reduction of delivery wait times, a reduction of motor vehicle idling time, and a reduction in the number of motor vehicles needed by the firm for equal revenues before system installation.

Second on our illustration list of technological aids to service delivery is data mining in product maintenance, such as gaming consoles and their games. Here, the orchestration of long-standing relationships among strategic and product life-cycle management constituents proved particularly helpful in convincing colleagues to try data mining within product testing and maintenance. Finally, we focus on the backtracking of customer record errors within a CRM system, considering three well-known firms. The combination of proactive and reactive customer ordering makes backtracking of record errors, such as wrong addresses, particularly

annoying. Developing business indicators for proposed technologies with other well-known firms from product maintenance and CRM settings may signal that such explorations have broad value. It is hoped that both sets of firms find these strategies to be as exciting to them as it was to prepare them for a joint conference with a long-time friend.

The focal goal of the process of strategic market planning is to leverage business capabilities in pursuit of customer satisfaction through enhanced service. To the degree that such plans also improve overall service system efficiency, there exists positive feedback that enables incremental improvement of offerings to capture evolving requirements, more profitable service offerings due to financial gains from efficiency, and ease in recovering excess service costs through market prices in highly competitive markets. All three may be achieved through the utilization of specific advanced technological capabilities, which each provide added value and unique characteristics to a firm's service delivery capabilities.

6. Measuring and Evaluating Service Excellence in Sales

Measuring service sales managers need to determine if service excellence in sales is occurring. They need to confirm that selling activities fully meet and exceed the expectations of both internal and external customers. To effectively assess and monitor the service levels of the sales force, a variety of assessment tools and techniques are available. By using these tools and techniques, managers can assess where service excellence in sales is being achieved and where performance improvement is required. In turn, this service assessment process can include not only internal factors, for example, a company's sales force and the marketing department, but also an enterprise's significant external influences, its customers and competitors, as well as other respective sales forces. Thus, the process of evaluating and measuring sales service should consider how companies carry out activities and transactions leading to significant results and revenues. At the same time, appropriate measurement is essential to observe how customers react and respond to these efforts. Statistics gathered on selling activities and functions that do not emphasize positive customer-related results do not fully capture necessary effectiveness measurements. Assessing performance in other areas is equally important. Restrictions on available data mean managers cannot easily relate their selling activities to each of the seven main forms of sales performance that are grouped as follows. These seven performance domains not only reflect outcomes but also influences of the selling process.

6.1. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are the leading and lagging measures used by sales organizations to evaluate both the financial and operational performance of the profession. Theoretically, leading measures provide an early signal of upcoming financial performance, while lagging measures look backward over an extended period. Leading and lagging measures are the statistical cousins of drivers and outcomes and represent different faces of the cause-and-effect relationships in the Balanced Scorecard framework. Normal sales force activity can lead to the achievement of sales goals and objectives. Sales executives use observed changes in driver performance to warn of potential changes in sales goal attainment. Achievement of all or most sales personnel, service, production, and innovation goals, over time, almost always leads to the attainment of financial goals.

Key performance indicator design and use is based on a series of principles, the most important including breadth and balance, proportionality, honesty and fairness, continuous improvement ability, and support for the organization's culture and strategy. KPIs can involve a myriad of monetary and non-monetary measures, and during the past decade, no customer service activity has become as predominant, or least written about, as much as customer satisfaction and service quality. Other common KPIs evaluated by sales personnel include productivity, performance, retention, and strategic planning that are more suited for evaluation and discussion at the departmental, functional, or organizational levels. Service management researchers have been slow to study; we can find no published comparison study of sales KPIs and their usage.

6.2. Customer Feedback and Surveys

Accurately understanding the needs of our customers, being sensitive to their feedback, and improving subsequent practices are all necessary steps for achieving service excellence. This is particularly true for sales organizations because the competition for prestigious accounts and large orders is often fierce. Sales organizations have learned that in those markets, customers also value the level and quality of customer service received from the salespeople. Customer feedback and surveys are very favorable tools for measuring success in activities and processes performed in delivering the desired sales and service levels. Traditionally, salespeople have relied on their personal expertise and long-term relationships with the customer in assessing sales or customer service performance. This creates highly subjective evaluations.

Customer feedback can be gained at a formal meeting with senior officials of the organization. Surveys can be conducted orally or in writing, either on a regular basis, asking standard questions of which typically a customer would know the answer, or conducted at the customer's request or with their specific participation to answer an array of questions originally designed by the sales organization. Because feedback is interpreted differently by different people, we find senior officials of the sales organization assume the customer's satisfaction without any proof. Whether they already know something about the performance or not, all relationships with our customers and the marketplace should be built on the basis of objective information, which is generated by asking the customers what they think and using this information to shape actions and processes. Accurate measures of customer attitude can reveal strengths and weaknesses in the sales organization, make alignments, increase sales success, and simplify strategic planning. Accurate performance measurement is management's dependent responsibility for translating customer input into action and for the improvement of the sales organization process. Such actions should be the result of a pragmatic look at the poll's results, regardless of the extent of sales success. Information gained from customer feedback and surveys should be used to improve processes and methods, refine strategy and tactics, fill skills and professional education gaps, and accelerate the potential for change in the company's general corporate culture and the role of the sales organization whether it is an independent entity or an integral part of a multi-layered organization.

7. Training and Development for Salespeople

The training and development of salespeople represent a major activity for most companies. Ineffective training is perceived to be a major area of concern by many business people, and they believe that it leads to low morale in the sales force and dissatisfied customers. Service business managers must consider the specific sales-oriented aspects of what is expected in their unique environment. This may be somewhat different from traditional sales training associated with the distribution of physical products. General sales training must be integrated with the special aspects of service. These may include training of service personnel selling in retail or service locations, consultative service with direct contact and temporary extended service relationships, and person-to-person selling by service personnel. It is useful for the service manager to know something about training goals, objectives, methods, and training focus.

7.1. Continuous Learning and Skill Enhancement Programs

Continuous Learning and Skill Enhancement The paradigm of sales force management is shifting in the era of globalization, information technology, stiff market competition, cost pressures, and customer sophistication. Companies, big or small, established or new age, want sales personnel to take the role of marketing professionals. Selling today is customer value management. However, sales teams often do not know how to create value in real sales circumstances. The sales professional needs personal, interpersonal, and organizational skills; the ability to speak politely and intelligently in business meetings, voice the impression of an established and predictable company, and provide creative solutions to customer problems. Good solutions arise out of meaningful conversations about customer environments, issues, and business goals. Solutions depend on the ability to gain the confidence of the customer and pursue a well-planned conversation. The Competitive Selling process imparts certain behaviors and skills that enable organizations to accomplish this. The training focuses on understanding the common challenge areas, using behavior modeling and learning sustenance techniques to expedite the knowledge development process rapidly. Sales effectiveness and sustained sales performance is not a one-time workshop affair. Companies must adopt practices and processes, establish service standards, and establish performance review systems tied to rewards for continuous learning and skill enhancements to build and continuously develop the effectiveness of the sales personnel team.

8. Case Studies and Best Practices in Service Excellence

Case studies and best practices offer a unique and valuable perspective for exploring issues related to service excellence. Case studies provide rich, in-depth, descriptive detail that helps the reader get the flavor of the issue—its people, its protagonists, its setting, its pain, its challenges, its joys. Case studies provide a wonderful learning opportunity because they reveal mistakes and opportunities. They offer experiential learning opportunities that can prepare students to be better decision-makers when they deal with these issues in the real world.

A major theme that emerged from case studies and management reviews is that organizations that thrive in today's customer-oriented service environment possess a deep-seated commitment to service. Organizational dedication to service can be measured in many ways, including the use of performance management tools, the

use of teams for continuous improvement, external recognition and reward systems, and the empowerment of employees to solve problems at the point of customer interaction. Organizations generally do not recognize their strengths and weaknesses with respect to their service provision. By doing so, they deny themselves an effective strategy for survival and instead encourage pricing and product differentiation and a race to the lowest cost of service provision. The case studies that follow aim to provide insights into many varied aspects of achieving service excellence. Such insights are about how service excellence is created and maintained. In short, they are about being the best that you can be in serving the needs of your internal and external customers.

In summary, experiences are shared about how, without study, analysis, or the equivalent of strategic excellence audits, organizations may not fully appreciate where they stand with respect to service provision and the customer. They may not detect changes and, importantly, they may miss real opportunities for ensuring current and future customer satisfaction. The case studies tap into the specialized skills needed by people at all levels to complete the strategic objectives of service excellence. The studies aim to show what has been achieved by different organizations and offer conceptual insights into the innovative and developmental approaches necessary to achieve enduring service excellence. As a result of that reading, some changes in the strategies employed are being considered for their larger role in the strategic development of service organizations.

9. Conclusion and Future Trends

There are many factors that contribute to a salesperson achieving service excellence in the selling situation. We have proposed a framework with important antecedents and outcomes that have also been discussed in the light of existing findings. However, much of the research in the area has been exploratory in nature, aiming to achieve a better understanding and flowing directly from the inherent complexities of service encounters. While this research adds a significant contribution to the selling effectiveness debate, future studies can go further to test the effectiveness of specific variables associated with achieving service excellence in sales. For example, the influence of the seamlessness of the process could be investigated, as well as how a customer's mental structure affects the salesperson within that context of selling.

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In addition, while the development of the dyadic model is new and unique, the model could certainly be used with the same variables within more complex sales situations. In the first place, it would be beneficial to investigate the processes within the complex sales environment. However, once this is done and strategies are developed, the model can be used to directly compare the simple and complex sales environments from an empirical perspective. This would certainly help to answer some of the interesting questions related to the uniqueness of the service sales situation and the processes developed to manage and create value in the buyer-seller exchange.

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