**Building a Customer Service Plan**

I reckon that the art of customer service is pretty much the same as the art of any successful relationship, but with the big difference that the *customer* is always right. (In direct contrast, of course, to the relationship you have with your lover/best friend/big sister/goldfish, where *you* are always right.)

So, with the knowledge that the customer is always right and you are probably wrong, a good starting point for your customer service plan is to ask for customers to chronicle your shortcomings. Provide feedback forms on your website, run competitions with customer surveys, or simply muster up enough courage to ask customers what you could do better.

Next comes the tricky bit. When customers provide you with an honest appraisal, you’re going to have to listen. Unlike my better half, I suggest you don’t listen with a glazed expression and one ear still listening to the sports channel on the radio. No, you’re going have to listen hard and take all criticism on board.

Customers may not be criticising you personally, of course. Maybe customers are unhappy with one of your employees, or with your delivery times, punctuality or return procedures.

If you know customers aren’t happy with an aspect of your service, your response needs to be a three-stage process. First, figure out what you’re going to do about the problem and take action. Second, decide how you’re going to measure this aspect of your service. Third, follow up in a few months’ time to see whether you’re coming up to scratch.

For example, maybe customers complain about delivery times. You listen, concur that a six-month average for a parcel to get from one side of the city to the other is probably not good enough, and decide to switch couriers. Next, you set up a system so that you can measure average delivery times, so that you know for sure the new courier is better than the previous one. Then, when some weeks or months have lapsed, you follow up with customers and check in on their general happiness.

Remember that customer happiness isn’t something warm and fuzzy that’s hard to measure. In the same way that I can measure the contentment of my teenage son by looking at the range of foodstuffs in the fridge, you can usually measure customer happiness by looking at mundane things such as the average time your company takes to process an order, respond to an email or answer the phone. Your job is to identify what elements you can measure, set targets, communicate these to staff and monitor the response.

The other crucial element in any customer service plan is to figure out how you’re going to respond to unhappy customers. (A sack weighted down with stones isn’t going to do the trick.) Similar to a jilted lover, the average unhappy customer shares their disgruntlement with at least 10 other people. However, if you manage to fix this customer’s problem, particularly if you can provide reassurance that you now have systems in place so this problem can’t happen again, you can often convert displeasure to undying affection.

As part of your complaints procedure, create a system where customers can communicate complaints easily, and ensure your response (not just you, but your employees also) always includes making sure you listen to the customer. You (or your employees) need to let the customer know you’ve heard what they had to say, explain how you’re going to fix the problem, and reassure the customer of the changes you’ll make so this problem doesn’t happen again.

In short, a customer service plan starts with the somewhat scary step of finding out what customers really think about you. Once you receive this appraisal, you’re ready to set up systems so you can measure your own performance, solicit ongoing customer feedback and respond to customer complaints.

Think of your customer service plan as something that not only makes you a better person, but also, unlike relationship counselling, has the added bonus of making your business more profitable to boot. Who could possibly argue with that?