

Publication: The Business Times, p 12

Date: 19 July 2016

Headline: Good service a key business differentiator, says customer experience guru

"The service staff is a brand ambassador. The customer interacts with a brand through the service staff and hence, they form a critical part of the equation," says Mr Williams.



## Good service a key business differentiator, says customer experience guru

SERVICE is indeed a key business differentiator as people are likely to buy when they feel good. The role of companies is to create experiences where the customer is comfortable and positive as this will help increase the propensity to buy, says a local authority on customer experience.

A distinctive customer experience needs to be designed and developed by companies so that customers gradually build a connection to the brand through the service staff who deliver it, according to Bentley Williams, chief of Wow! Academy.

"Customers are human beings with emotions and they will resonate with brands that understand them and what they want and need," says Mr Williams, speaker, author and thought leader in customer experience.

Stressing the importance and value of the service staff on a business and its competitiveness, Mr Williams says: "The service staff is a brand ambassador. The customer interacts with a brand through the service staff and hence, they form a critical part of the equation."

"A well equipped and motivated service staff will be able to connect and build relationships with customers, increasing the brand's loyal customer base. They can sometimes make or break the brand perception in one interaction with the customer."

Mr Williams was a panellist at a discussion during the release of the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) 2016 first-quarter scores along with Candy Chua, Singtel vice-president, consumer operations, and Rachel Tan, general manager, DFS Venture Singapore (Pte) Ltd. Neeta Lachmandas, executive director of the Institute of Service Excellence at SMU (ISES), moderated the discussion.

The customer experience guru sees great value in ISES's quarterly survey of various important sectors of the Singapore economy and the CSISG scores for the retail and info-comm industries.

"It is great for organisations to have an important indication as to how they are faring with regards to service and how customers perceive them currently. It is also valuable for them to benchmark themselves against similar players in the industry. They can use the scores as a key performance indicator yearly to measure the impact of their customer experience programmes.

"The scores help the companies ascertain what drives value for their customers. This will then help them redirect their focus towards elements that will connect with their target group, thus increasing satisfaction," he says.

On the strategies and innovative best practices companies should adopt to deal with the current business environment in retail and ICT, Mr Williams says: "Companies today have to do more with less to survive and excel. Technology can help in certain ways as long as it does not overwhelm the customer. The key is finding the right connection between a Wi-fi connection and a human connection!

"Companies need to ascertain which are key touchpoints that matter to their customers and invest their resources in these areas – do what matters to customers at the points that matter to them."

To keep up with the fast-changing needs of consumers, constant conversations and feedback gathering from customers are key. Companies must have channels that are readily available for customers to share immediate feedback.

It is also essential for companies to respond to customer feedback in a timely manner so as to acknowledge their importance. "The customer today has many choices – if he bothers to give you feedback, take advantage to explain or ratify. It's worth the effort," says Mr Williams.

To promote staff retention and talent development "we need to re-imagine how we do business and develop talent", he adds.

"The development of all kinds of innova-

tive business models has led to the customer having new and improved expectations of the businesses – new expectations have been imposed on businesses which are seen to be almost archaic if they don't follow suit.

"The new economy is fluid as the customer is in the centre of the equation. She expects the same brand experience across all the different channels. There is a disconnect if the online experience is different from the brick-and-mortar store.

"The time has come for businesses to study how they can converge and align their various channels to facilitate the customer having a distinct, personalised and aligned customer experience," he stresses.

Asked how some companies are able to keep service staff for more than a decade or even longer, Mr Williams' view is that staff stay in a company for a number of reasons. "From my experience, staff stay a long time in companies where they find their values are aligned with the company values. This deep connection encourages them to see the positives and they work hard.

"Companies that create a distinctive purpose and live by this daily help provide the compass for staff. Staff also like a place that values their contributions and facilitates teamwork and camaraderie. This makes them feel comfortable and happy."

To promote service excellence given the current business and economic environment, he suggests that businesses show staff that good service leads to a loyal customer base that increases their spend.

"Recognise staff for their efforts in increasing this base. Equip them to increase the rate of conversion – focus on the needle that needs to be moved. In these challenging times, companies need to align the customer journey map with the sales funnel to remain current, relevant and basically to remain in business.

"Incentivise service staff that score high on service and conversion rates. People behave the way they are measured," he concludes.

**Source: The Business Times @ Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Permission required for reproduction**