Customer service evolves through the generations

Providing options for clients, while working on changing their behaviour to adopt new processes, will ensure a smoother and seamless experience for companies. BY NEETA LACHMANDAS

"I'm sorry you experienced this problem. Your feedback is greatly valued, and our customer service team will reach out to you in the next three working days."

This line will sound familiar to anyone who has had to deal with customer service, no matter what the industry, product or service that you're dealing with. It's one of the common experiences that customers go through when trying to contact a company's customer service. Unfortunately when struggling with a product or service, the last thing anyone wants to hear is an automated reply from a chatbot. However, it looks like this is an experience that customers might as well get used to, as Gartner estimates that artificial intelligence will account for 85 per cent of customer relationships by 2020.

While businesses are adopting chatbots and mobile messaging as an alternative channel for customer interaction, apps such as Uber and Airbnb have embraced in-app messaging as their primary form of customer service. Understanding their target audience makes up a large part of ensuring a good experience, but the question also remains – how can they reach out to the older generation, who are traditionally more used to communicating with an actual customer service officer? Technology as a disruptive agent has affected all walks of life, including customer service, but how have the different generations adapted?

Singapore has four distinct generation groups: the Pioneer Generation (66 years old and over); the Baby Boomers (50 to 65); the Generation X (35 to 49) and Millennials (15 to 34), with each generation having its own nuanced preferences and needs as consumers.

In our recent *Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) 2017 Q1* study, 1.9 per cent of Pioneer Generation respondents reported using self-checkout counters as their most frequent method of checkout at supermarkets. The numbers aren't much better for Baby Boomers, with only 13.6 per cent using self-checkouts. On the other hand, 29.2 per cent of Millennials and Gen Xs were the largest adopters of self-checkout counters, with about 55.3 per cent using them as their most frequent method of checkout.

These numbers suggest that the adoption of technology is stratified and companies should be aware of the preferences of their target market. In order to ensure that customer experience is a positive one for everyone who interacts with the brand, businesses need to understand their customer profiles to create the appropriate journeys for each one – there is no "one size fits all" solution. This could mean offering a variety of touch points, from an app which can offer assistance, to touch points with human interaction.

SMART NATION, SMARTER SERVICE

During the National Day Rally 2017, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong mentioned the lack of cashless services, highlighting the government's push for retail and F&B to jump on the Smart Nation goal. The consumer experience in most industries is already prevalent with various technologies, from iPad menus in restaurants to mobile apps for shopping centres. Technology, however, isn't limited to giving customers access points on digital media, as more usefully, it can also be employed to complement the customer experience so that staff can focus on doing higher-value work that can enhance the overall brand experience.

As technologies evolve, so too should service staff, and it is important to ensure that companies do not replace humans with technology. While technology enablers will become the norm in the future in various manpower-strapped industries, at the heart of every business is its people, and an over-reliance on technology could be isolating some of their tar-

get customers. Keeping this in mind, the balance between human interaction and technology needs to be found, and service staff and their standard operating procedures (SOP) must be optimised to complement the use of technology.

For instance, after introducing e-menus at restaurants, service staff who were previously in charge of taking orders can now concentrate being proactive in engaging customers. This also means that they can focus on improving and supporting other areas of the business. Through this small shift in working styles, restaurants can simultaneously lighten their staff's workload, while improving customer service.

Details such as these should not be ignored, and the CSISG from 2016 covering the F&B sector showed that attentiveness of service staff and their ability to accommodate special requests were top attributes that impacted customers' perceptions of quality.

With consumers becoming increasingly connected digitally and on social media, companies are now operating in a more transparent climate where information is available and shared freely. The saying goes that knowledge is power, and as such, the consumer of today is more "powerful" than ever before. Here are four tips that businesses could incorporate to provide greater service to their informed customers:

Service staff themselves must be empowered. Through the right training and by nurturing a sense of ownership, companies can make their staff feel confident enough to make decisions when it comes to addressing customer complaints or delights. Ideally, the service staff should be brand ambassadors for the company. This can be done by getting staff on board with the company's values, and encouraging them to be proud of their service. If employees believe in the brand, they are more likely to promote it to their own networks. When this occurs, customer confidence in the company is strengthened as the review is from a source they trust.

Bad reviews are impossible to avoid in the service industry, as mistakes – or just pure bad luck – occur. Today, conversations are amplified in this age of social media, so it is now more important than ever for businesses to incorporate excellent service recovery. When possible, companies should not turn to pointing the finger at service staff when it comes to customer complaints – service recovery could be a much more rewarding solution. By issuing a genuine apology and encouraging the customer to return for a better experience, the business could turn a staff's mistake into an opportunity to earn a loyal customer instead. The team of service staff will also feel that they have the backing of the company, which could instil more confidence in their work.

Keep your staff informed. When operating in an online environment, there are opportunities and perils. Information on products and services is easily found online and the Internet is a great platform to promote your product. However, the last thing a company wants is to spend money on online campaigns and promotions, and be let down by service staff at the brick-and-mortar store who are unaware of the promotions. As such, companies must ensure that staff are briefed about such online campaigns and promotions.

Provide a range of options. Businesses should bear in mind that a wide range of consumers use their services, even for disruptive services. Moving towards an online-only customer feedback platform can present roadblocks, especially for customers who are not as tech-savvy. Providing options for customers, while you work on changing customer behaviours to adopt new processes, will ensure a smoother transformation and seamless experience.

IMPROVING SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Technology has certainly aided Singapore's push towards service excellence, but there's also more than one way to achieve customer excellence, even when dealing with multigenerational consumers. While introducing new technology in a business requires training and educating on the consumer's end to be able to interact in this new avenue, the NTUC Social Enterprise training programmes also address the issue from the business side. By 2030, one in three people will be over 60 years old. NTUC FairPrice, for example, aims to train 500 staff in senior-friendly skills in two years, in order for them to be able to help their older consumers use technology. This tailors an experience to the senior shoppers without isolating any of the younger generation. It's this thinking that avoids the issues of replacing humans completely with technology, and ensuring that the two complement each other, while ensuring that service staff remain relevant.

There are always aspects of customer service that transcend technologies and generations. Businesses should bear this in mind and understand that the human touch can add sincerity that technology cannot. Ensuring a balance between technology and human service is a key factor that businesses have to keep in mind if they truly want to provide excellent service.

▮ The writer is executive director of the Institute of Service Excellence (ISE) at SMU. ISE was jointly set up by SMU and Workforce Singapore to elevate service levels and promote a culture of service excellence in Singapore.

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