Are Your Non-customer Focused Processes Sabotaging Customers and Your Customer-focused People?

I once interviewed the head of customer service for a large consumer manufacturing company. She had diligently implemented customer service training for all their call center employees as part of their company-wide customer focus initiative. The training covered listening skills, empathy techniques, tone of voice, even "smiling" while on the phone, given the relationship of smiling to one's personal demeanor and how one comes across in the phone conversation.

They were frustrated, however. After some months, they were still experiencing less-than-desired scores from their customer satisfaction survey. In discussing their scores in a group huddle, one valued call center employee asked, "I'm smiling all I can, what else do you want me to do?"

Deciding to get at the root cause of their lower scores, the company held a series of innovation groups to decipher what was leading to lower scores. One thing became obvious. Their internal processes, which call center employees had no control over, were causing the mischief. Call center employees were handicapped in doing their job because they did not have the right information to respond to customer needs.

While the company had made a major investment in leadership workshops and employee training as the core of their customer focus initiative, they neglected to evaluate whether their processes also were customer focused.

They are not alone. Let me share a personal story, from a customer perspective, of how company non-customer focused processes can wreak havoc on call center employees and customers.

I purchased a kitchen appliance from a company that prides itself on quality and the premium market positioning of their product. But, what they apparently didn't consider is this: "What is the customer view on the total product experience?" Sure, they likely get feedback on overall perceptions of the product, initial purchase experience, and satisfaction post sale, but it must end there. Either that or they are getting customer feedback during the entire customer lifecycle and ignoring it – I will give them the benefit of the doubt that this is not the case.

What they seemingly neglected was the maintenance and repair experience. Here is where the mischief started. Bear with me while I connect the dots, they are a little complicated.

Part "A" broke on the appliance. (Retail value of a few dollars at most.) But, Part A is attached to Part B. And, Part B is attached to Part C. Hence, to replace Part A, Part B must be removed and with it, so must Part C. Unreal, huh?

It turns out that the company used a less than quality set of screws to attach part "B" to Part "C." Specifically they used steel screws rather than aluminum. Steel screws can rust, and they did so after continued use.

Removing the rusted screws that attached Part B to Part C required drilling out the screws; a screwdriver would not work. Drilling out the screws in turn ruined Part C that was attached to Part B.

So here's the rub, to replace Part A, which broke, with a new part A, the company had no problem. Part A was in stock. But, Part C has to be replaced, too. And guess what? Part C is not in stock.

I recognize that any company can run a parts shortage and I would forgive them. But this appliance was less than four years old. I would expect parts to still be available. I just wanted to know how soon before I can get my part.

But, here's what happened next.

Even though the company was out of stock on Part C, it nonetheless sent the wrong replacement part to the service technician for Part C, apparently not knowing internally that it was the wrong part. And, they sent the wrong part to the repair technician not once but twice. Each time the technician scheduled an appointment with me. Each time, I stayed home from work for the appointment. Each time the technician called and said, "Whoops; they sent me the wrong part." And, after the last time, the technician said, I don't know when I can get the right part; it's out of stock."

Now I take action and call the company that made the appliance. The call center employee says, "It's not in stock, we don't have an estimate of when it will be available, but we'll call you back in a few days and let you know."

No call back. I call again and talk to another call center employee. Same story, same promise to call back. No call back.

I call again. The company says they will try to locate the part, but it could be weeks, even months. And, the call center rep says, "It happened to me on another product from my company, and it took two months!" That was reassuring.

I now request a whole new appliance, given that the un-available part C is critical to the company performing it's warranty obligation under Part A. Meanwhile I talk to the service technician and is told that their parts ordering system, wired to the manufacturer, indicated a ship date of over 1 year. Also, I searched online for secondary market sources, and no one on the planet has Part C.

Finally I work with the service technician to see if the old Part C can be salvaged. Time elapsed so far – 6 weeks. No functional kitchen appliance in the meantime. The technician spends hours trying to fix the broken part C, and the day he came to install it, the manufacturer sent a new Part C they found somewhere. Of course, they didn't tell me or the technician that they found one and had sent it. My cost to get the few-dollar Part A replaced by having to go through all these steps with Part C? Over $300!

So, how does all this relate to an otherwise customer-focused call center? You can imagine the poor call center employees who have to deal with customers in this situation and keep them happy by "smiling." No amount of customer service training could help them overcome what indeed was a fundamental process problem – they had no way of knowing internally where any parts were, whether new parts were going to be made, and when they might be available. On one call, the customer service rep said to me: "OK, this is where you are going to yell at me, right?" I did not yell, of course, knowing that the customer service rep was caught in the middle.

Why is this a non-customer focused process? Consumers have a total experience with a product, and an expectation that if something breaks there will be warranty repair, and there will be parts available. In truth, the consumer doesn't even think about

whether there will be parts available; that thought only emerges when discovering otherwise. The consumer also has an expectation that a call center employee would be empowered with enough information to answer his question, or at least the ability to refer him to someone who could answer his question. Those expectations fell apart in my example because the company apparently had no information system to inform the call center employee with the right information. (You can bet they had a state-of-the-art CRM system, however.) Moreover, the company's entire positioning to the consumer as a premium brand fell apart because there was not attention to helping the consumer if a part failed or attention to having the stock on hand. And, by the way, the premium positioning also fell apart because the company used cheaper screws that would rust, rather than spending a few cents more for aluminum screws that would not.

Needless to say, I will never again buy from this company.

Those call center customer satisfaction scores? How do you think the service rep would be rated on responsiveness, or solves my problem? How about a 1 on a 5-point scale? Not their fault, but they will get the blame. The root cause of lower customer satisfaction scores using this example, however, was lack of an internal process for parts management and available parts information that could empower the call center representative to actually help the customer. There was no evidence

of focusing on the customer beyond initial purchase, from cradle to grave.

If you think this is an isolated example, think again. How many times as a consumer have you confronted something similar? Or, as a call center employee, how many times have you thrown up your hands in frustration at not being able to help because you lack information or anyone you can turn to? How many times do you have to deal with irate customers because internal processes do not give you the information nor empower you to actually solve the customer's problem? Yet, your training and service protocol still requires you to say at the end of the call. "Anything else I can help you with?"

The customer experience is not a onetime thing, not just an initial purchase. It is a journey. And, the fixes for building customer satisfaction and loyalty are not just training customer–serving employees. They require the entire organization to "get it," to ask whether their processes also are aligned with what customers will need and value, from cradle to grave. And then to make sure they are.

Hansa has developed a set of tools to identify and assess the total customer experience. These include our proprietary ExperienceBoards™ techniques, emotions mapping, customer experience mapping, and customer journey work. If you would like to explore how your organization can uncover opportunities to enhance your customer experience, please contact us.

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