

Waters

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Waters get the Measure of Creating Value
From Service

Waters

What's the best way to train a field service team? The most obvious answer is to ensure they are experts in the products or technologies they are servicing.

But, as ever, the seemingly straightforward response does not always give the whole picture. While having the right knowledge has to be a pre-requisite of the job, these days, service teams also often have more customer contact than anyone else in an organisation. They are in a prime position to build more sustainable and profitable long-term relationships. Yet, while some service personnel might relish this changing role, others may be reluctant or want more guidance as to the right questions to ask and how to change their behaviour.

Working with Huthwaite International, Waters Corporation, worldwide provider of innovative analytical science solutions to healthcare, environmental, food safety, water quality and other laboratories, took a logical and original approach to this challenge. The result? Improvements in knowledge levels and improvements in customer feedback.

Highly qualified

It's little wonder that Waters' service tended to be very technology-centric. For 50 years the company has pushed the boundaries of science to support customer discoveries, operations, performance and regulatory compliance with its analytical instruments and technologies.

Its field service engineers are highly qualified, often hold PhDs and consequently are both academic and scientific in their thinking. In this way, they mirror the type of customer they visit, who in the main part, is either engaged in research and development or in testing at clinical laboratories for healthcare services and even, most recently, for the Olympics.

However, as Tim Jones, Waters' Northern Europe service manager explains: "As with many technology companies these days, we talk about solutions rather than individual products and our sales are more complex and consultative than ever before."

"It's not that we expected our service team to suddenly go out and sell these solutions. We felt that, if we raised the level of our service to create more value for customers, it would help these customers to be more successful themselves which would ultimately have a positive impact on our sales."

Previously, service jobs had been allocated according to specialist skills. However, last year, Waters carried out a major re-organisation. Each engineer was given a certain number of customer accounts to "own". They were to bring in different expertise as needed, but should manage the service project, get to know and understand the customer and identify ways that Waters could further help them in their business.

It was around this time that Jones attended a seminar on 'Sales Through Service' presented by Huthwaite International. Huthwaite International is renowned for its research-led sales training and recently it has turned its spotlight onto the role of service personnel. At a time when many companies are less receptive to sales calls, service teams are in an excellent position to identify areas where their solutions could bring benefits and so support the sales team with intelligence, leads or even by closing and initiating a sale themselves.

Jones could see that Huthwaite International's approach reflected that of his own company. "I really liked Huthwaite International's research-based approach. However, it was when they suggested how we could maximise the return on any service training investment that I realised that working with Huthwaite International would match our strategy in more ways than one," he says.



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Huthwaite International works with partner Cognisco to assess competency levels before and after training. Baseline testing enables training programmes to be designed around areas where the need is the greatest, to avoid wasting investment and time teaching teams skills they already possess. This is followed up after training to assess the effectiveness of the programme.

“I could have made all kinds of assumptions as to what training was needed,” says Jones. “However, it would never be more than that. This way, I knew I would get the most from the investment by providing targeted training to fill the identified knowledge gaps.”

Samantha Blackburn, Waters’ Regional HR manager, Europe North, was one of the senior team that helped add the Waters touch to Huthwaite International’s “Outstanding Service” training. Using the intelligence gathered by Cognisco, Huthwaite International and Waters created tailored materials using typical real-life scenarios.

“The most common reason our service engineers visit a customer is because there is a problem. Often they are greeted by a customer who is already worried about downtime or that time-dependent test results can’t be delivered. It’s not always a good basis for a relationship and the tendency is to get on with the engineering job in hand.”

“So one of the areas we focused on was turning round this situation. Naturally customers are hoping that our service personnel can get the equipment up and running right away, but sometimes diagnostics can take a day or so. Build into this situation that both the customer and engineer are most likely to be real experts in the same field and the result can be a battle of academic wits if the situation is not handled with sensitivity,” says Blackburn.

Initial assessments showed that, as expected, the service engineers were already good at investigating technical problems. However, going beyond this and looking at broader needs required more attention. The training sessions focused on improving skills relating to key behaviours identified by Huthwaite International’s research as having significant impacts on service outcomes. These were delivered to around 30 of Waters long-serving field engineers.

Says Jones: “We focused on questioning skills and on how to get explicit answers which could give a real insight into a customer’s business. We also covered how to handle objections in a positive way and a key issue - when and how to hand over to another specialist but still manage the customer relationship.”



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At the heart of the training was the concept of creating value. Huthwaite explains: "The training was designed to show that the more a service engineer knew about a customer and their operations, the more value they could offer, by pre-empting problems and suggesting solutions to existing challenges. In turn Waters would gain value through having a loyal customer base which would impact on future sales."

"The service managers then attended coaching training to help them support their engineers through coaching on and off the job and to sustain the behaviours learned on the programme."

Investment pays off

It seems that already Waters' investment in training its service personnel is paying off, with a noticeable rise in customer satisfaction from data gathered. Blackburn also reports: "I've noticed a subtle shift in the type of language used by the service team. It's far more customer-focused."

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The Cognisco follow-up assessments provide a measure of the improvements in the engineers' understanding. These highlighted improvements in key topic areas including 'saying 'no' persuasively', 'handling objections', 'final summary' and 'continuous improvement'. The team showed marked improvements in all these skills, with post-training scores for handling objections and continuous improvement around three times the pre-training figures (figure 1).

A recent Huthwaite International study, Behavioural trends; a benchmark study of complaint resolution behaviours, shows how important these skills are in dealing with difficult situations. As the graph below shows (when G equals 'good', A, acceptable and U unacceptable), the more an agent disagrees and fails to explain the process, the less favourable the outcome of the call becomes (figure 2).

"The programme has been highly successful," says Blackburn. "From an HR point of view the assessments dovetail with the very structured approach we take to defining specific competencies for job descriptions. From a business standpoint it shows real value for money."

Jones agrees: "My mission as service manager is to ensure the success of our customers and in doing so build strong, long-lasting customer relationships and create value for all concerned. It's clear that the service team are now well-placed to do this."

Huthwaite is also delighted by the results: "Our work with Waters demonstrates how a partnership approach combined with structured evaluation can help to maximise the value of training."

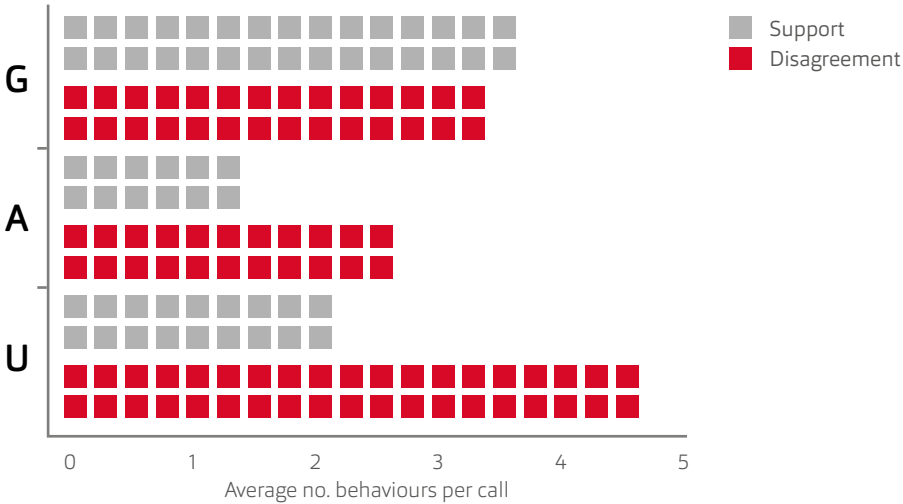
"Huthwaite International talks about a 'Service to Sales Continuum' which describes how service teams can be led in phases from just offering the technical fix needed, to providing Outstanding Service, identifying opportunities and supplying the sales team with intelligence, to eventually carrying out their own sales. Our work with Waters showed how this can be taken to any level, according to demands of the particular business."

But perhaps the last word should go to Jones' and Blackburn's colleague, Carla Brouwer, Waters' HR manager, Europe North. "These are brilliant," she said in response to the results of the Cognisco assessment. "The figures are a real eye-opener – and you can quote me on that."

Follow-up Assessments (Figure 1)

Topic	Pre-training Understanding	Post-training Understanding
Saying 'No' Persuasively	24	38
Handling Objections	9	25
Final Summary	48	54
Continuous Improvement	11	33

Showing Agreement (Figure 2)



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