

'An emotional bond is most compelling'

Sitting at her lunch table in Mumbai's sprawling Four Seasons hotel, renowned organisational development and management guru and president of TMI US (a human resource development company), Janelle Barlow, gears up for a hectic week of travel and seminars in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore on customer relations. But not before she lends a hand to the RPG Group to help it become a more customer-centric organisation and also release the rewritten version of her former bestseller, *A Complaint is a Gift. The much-sought-after Barlow conducts training programmes and workshops on customer service and service recovery for top management personnel from the leading companies around the world. She has also authored best-selling books like Branded Customer Service: The New Competitive Edge and Emotional Value — Creating Strong Bonds with Customers. Barlow spoke extensively to Byravee Iyer on customer service and the role it plays in building an organisation. Edited excerpts:*

What is good customer service?
If the purpose is to keep customers, every company has to do it differently. Customer needs are different in different places and essentially all humans are different. Keeping that in mind, the best customer service would be one that meets the expectations and needs of customers, and makes them come back. But there is no one way to do that.

How does a company create a strong bond with customers?
The most compelling bond is at an emotional level. Ninety-five per cent of the times a customer comes back because he is emotionally satisfied with a particular product or service provided by a company. It is like a man and a woman meeting each other. You can't talk someone into loving you, it has to do with chemistry. Take the case of mature economies where most organisations are more or less sell-

ing the same thing. What enables one firm to differentiate itself from another is service. Further, this differentiation builds a company's reputation. And employees form a big part of delivering the said service. Whether it's at a bank or even a non-service business, ultimately it boils down to a person.

How should big corporations with a large customer base cater to each customer's needs?

A big company has to create a mindset of what the overall business is. The company must be clear on what it is going to do for the customer. Research what they want. For instance, everyone wants to be a winner in a casino game.

Hence, that feeling needs to be delivered. To achieve that, the message first needs to be communicated internally and then externally, otherwise the casino will fail to meet customers' expectations. Next, it is important to make sure that staff behaves as people, and not as robots. No organisation should script their staff and direct their behaviour. For instance, some

companies dictate their employees to greet superiors in a certain manner, smile in a particular way, maintain eye contact and so on. The healthy way to do it would be for the leadership to trust the staff. If there is a lack of trust, the employees will spot that, and in turn, won't trust the leadership. Also, managers and supervisors should monitor exponential behaviour.

Are there any differences in the way people are managed in India and in the US?

The challenge in India in the past has been hiring labour cheap. Therefore, Indian firms tend to mass hire. Many times, fewer people doing more is better. Moreover, India has a more service

culture, which is not the case in America and Europe where there is a peer to peer relationship. People are constantly trading roles. Sometimes you provide me a service and sometimes I provide you one. The up and down position has to go, and I believe that it will happen ultimately.

What are some of the challenges companies face in delivering customer service?

Managers will say it is unqualified staff. That's a frequently identified problem. I, however, think the challenge lies in the department system followed by most organisations. Customers don't care for these departments, they just want their needs met. Nowadays customers' expectations are going up and they are even willing to pay for service. But when a company tells a customer that they would have to pay twice as much if they want better service, it is really hurting itself. What these firms don't realise is that enough people are willing to pay for a service. An-

other fatal flaw that companies commit is trying to be everything for everybody. Decide what the business objective is and deliver that. For in-

stance, Southwest Airlines in the United States never intended to be such a big airline. But their model of cheap fares was so well delivered that it made them the biggest airline in the country.

Which is the best way to evaluate customer satisfaction?

Most companies use customer satisfaction surveys. Of late, due to the sheer number of these surveys people have gotten tired of filling these forms and they refuse to do it anymore. Therefore, a survey needs to be kept simple, there needs to be space for writing comments, not just boxes to tick. At

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the most, there should be only 2-3 questions. Focus groups are also emerging as an important means to evaluate customer satisfaction. Companies need to spend a good two hours with customers and go in-depth. Also, mystery shopping is a good option. Therefore, a good mix will be both soft data and hard

data would be ideal in evaluating customer satisfaction.

Can customer service be taught through training?

Ideally, a person needs to be innately intelligent about customers. Can it be taught? It will be tough but it can be done if one is emotionally intelligent. At the end of the day, customers are looking for to be spoken politely to, treated fairly, have their answers met quickly and honestly. They want to feel like they can trust you. In reality, research points out that customers don't feel like they can trust companies. Every business has to clock 55 per cent of new customers every year to make up for the ones they lost.

Thus, when they upset a customer they are throwing profit away. And until recently, boards were not even addressing customer attrition. They were only focusing on revenues, profits and employee attrition. Boards should place customers at the centre and then strategise, because without customers there would be no business to run. Luckily, the focus seems to be shifting towards the customer these days. CEOs are talking less about competition and increasing profitability and more about meetings customer satisfaction. What's more, many firms are creating positions to represent customers in the board room. ■



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Janelle Barlow
President, TMI US

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