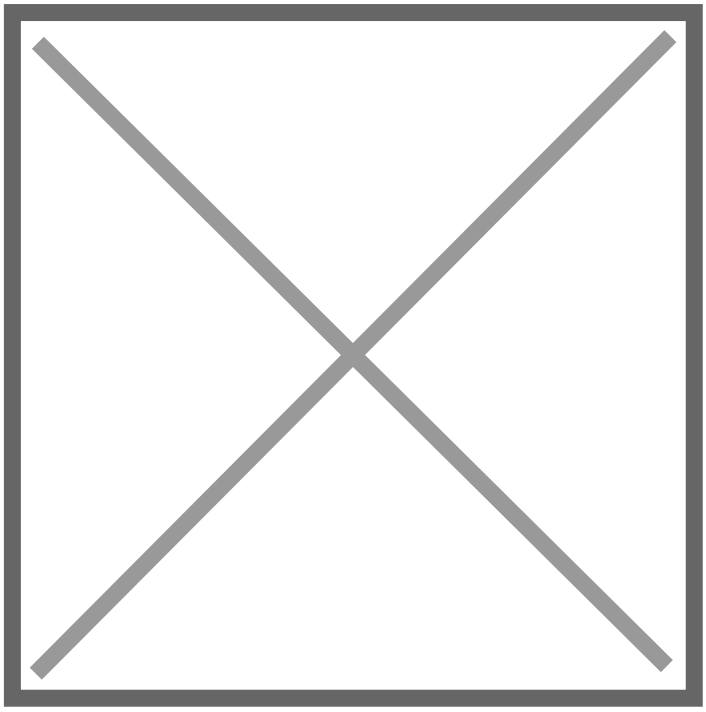
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Swift diagnosis for technical selling

12 November 2009 | News



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When it comes to basics like customer service and technical support, several firms find themselves totally out of sync with customer expectations, and the realities in the laboratories or on the shop floor

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The pump that was guaranteed as 'leak-proof' started leaking within five minutes of installation. To make matters worse, the needle on the pressure dial remained immobile at all pressures! The noise level of the pump was much higher than what the sales person had promised at the sales presentations. The reputation of the attending company service engineer and the technical expert was in tatters, even before they had a fair chance to impress the new customer. Murphy's Law? 'If something can go wrong, it will go wrong'.

While existing customers are far more understanding and tolerant of product and service failures because of the trust that has developed and the relationships formed over previous transactions, a nightmare like the one described above can seriously fracture the confidence of the new customer.

Â It is surprising that when it comes to basics like customer service and technical support, so many companies find themselves totally out of sync with customer expectations and the realities in the laboratories or on the shop floor. Can 'egg on the face' situations be avoided for both new and existing customers? Could the factory acceptance and site acceptance tests on the pump have been planned better? Could the pump have been subjected to more rigorous tests before dispatching to the new customer? Did quality control do its job? And several such questions would arise.

Â Â Â Â Â Inadequacies and misadventures in customer service and support should be looked upon as major opportunities. Or to state it more politely, it can create the difference between one brand and the preferred brand. The difference lies in the service approach the company subscribes to.Â Is top class support a cost? Or is it an opportunity to cement existing customer relationships, realize a continuing stream of revenues from a satisfied and brand loyal client, acquire more new business through outstanding customer referrals and testimonials? Can a track record of excellence in support and service be built brick-by-brick with the new customer and leveraged from the first step of the business relationship and add to company revenues and profits from service and support ?

Companies that subscribe to the latter, more correct view back up their beliefs with real investments in the CRM process.

How many companies engaged in the business of selling complex, technical tools and technologies to B2B customers have really understood, and meaningfully aligned the different elements of the CRM model?

What could be some meaningful service metrics? First Call Resolution (FCR) Ã¢â?¬â?? whether over the voice based system, the help desk, or the actual service/support engineer's visit. Are people and processes of the company tuned to this concept? Are they even aware of it? Sure, not all problems, especially technical problems can be addressed in the first call. But the point is, are FCRs being measured and analyzed? Suppose, out of 100 service requests only 20 percent are FCRs, and the remainingÂ 80 percent areÂ customer requests that require multiple service/support. What's the mean time between

failure (MTBF)? Is it within the norms accepted by the customer or is it that despite MTBF being very low (suggesting poor maintenance and improper use) you are happy that it is 'within SOP Norms' fixed arbitrarily by company policy? What is the mean time taken for diagnosing the problem? Is it spiraling upwards? What is the mean time taken for repairs? Does it imply poor trouble-shooting skills or unavailability of service parts? Are your support and service people overloaded and too stretched?

Yes,Â you have a sophisticated software-based service/support system in place, one that your company paid through its nose, costing a cool Rs 21 lakh! It accepts customers' service related calls toll-free, it logs in all the complaints nationally and even generates reports for you. The point is how have you used the data and information available to craft or re-craft service strategies and policies for continuous improvements. If the customer satisfaction index (CSI) still hovers at a dismal 70Ã¢â?¬â??75 percent year after year, have you achieved anything at all? Perhaps FCRs and root cause analysis will demonstrate the real problems and their causes; efficient time frames required to resolve them or the crucial area of training to reduce them.

Training is a critical pre-requisite for delivering top-end service and support. Unfortunately, design and implementation are given more importance in organizations. While the HR department is the most remote from the field.Â Most HR staff, with the foresight of ostriches, believe that product and technical training is more than adequate and is in fact 'the perfect antidote' to 'ramp up service levels'. A very critical component of effective and good service/support is the handling of customer relationships and customer perceptions. It demands a great variety of soft skills.

Skills like persuasive communication, tact, andÂ patience have to be taught to service/support people. How to diffuse and handle a crisis? What areÂ the best techniques to handle objections or anger? How to buy more time from the customer? How to communicate and share the nature of the problem with the customer? Can one tell a harmless 'white lie' or should one openly share all the 'moles, warts and pimples' of the issue with total integrity with the customer ?Â Service engineers straight out of college are at a total loss to handle such demands professionally. Few HR trainings focus on this. The result is that instead of giving good service they end up being good servile servants! And when it comes to impacting company image, there is a big difference between being servile and being service oriented. Nor can companies afford to wait for these engineers to acquire these skills after sixÃ¢â?¬â??eight years of on-the-job learning.

So, coming back to the beginning Ã¢â?¬â?? how could the service engineer have handled the pump failure problem with his new customer? First, by aligning himself with the customer, acknowledging the problem to the customer openly. Apologizing and then demonstrating to the customer some immediate, real and concrete action. No excuses, no quoting of constraining company rules or procedures.Â Swift diagnosis (not a trial and error approach), calling up the service centerÂ for a stand-by pump given the criticality of the pump for plant operations, an explanation to the customer on why the leakage cannot be plugged at the customer site.

And reassuring the customer by calling up the service head in his presence. After all the customer, like our boss, believes that his service guy should not be 'paid to be a part of the problem'.Â Â Â