

10 Dimensions of Great Customer Service

Although most executives talk about the importance of customer service, far fewer are able to succinctly describe what they mean by this term. It can easily become an empty cliché rather than a focused strategy for growth.

Yet customer service can be as important for product businesses as it is for service organisations. I recently worked with a group of manufacturing executives who made the point that customer service has been as important as pricing in helping them retain customers through the recession.

You are likely to turn your customer service proposition into a real competitive advantage when (1) It is focused on the few dimensions that your target customers really value; (2) You can create a service offering that is truly distinctive; and (3) You can deliver it consistently to the required standards.

I have identified ten dimensions of great customer service. Which should you be focusing on to drive loyalty, profitability and growth for your business?

1. **Convenience and accessibility.** Dell don't sell through retail stores, but you can buy custom-made computers on-line or over the phone 24-hours a day, which are then delivered direct to your door.
2. **Environment.** As a result of their selective distribution agreements, premium cosmetic and fragrance companies, such as Clinique and Estee Lauder, only supply retailers that deliver a high-quality retail environment to support their products.
3. **Self-help tools and support.** Supermarkets, for example, provide shoppers with a range of trolleys and baskets, and Nike has developed on-line support tools for runners set themselves training goals and track times and distances.
4. **Product and Service Availability.** One retailer I spoke with recently believes that improving the availability of key product lines has contributed over 3% to their sales growth in the last 12 months.
5. **Attitude and Friendliness.** A key aspect of Southwest Airline's success in the US has been its ability to deliver a friendly service alongside its low fares.
6. **Competence and expertise.** NetJets, the fractional aircraft ownership business, for example, is currently advertising how it spends more on training and safety than the major airlines.
7. **Speed and Responsiveness.** Tesco stole a march on their competitors when they first introduced their "one in front" policy, where they open a new till when shoppers, queuing to pay, have more than one other shopper in front of them.
8. **Personal(ised) attention.** Nordstroms, the US department store, places customer service as its #1 strategic objective. As part of this objective, the store provides all its sales people with access to a "Personal Book", allowing them to record and refer to individual customer preferences through their till systems.
9. **Community.** When a balding, middle-aged banker buys a Harley Davidson, he is buying into a concept of youth and vigour. Harley supports this relationship with their brand by establishing communities of Harley bikers, known as the Harley Owners Group.

10. **Links to related suppliers.** Apple has created a whole new industry of Apps providers for their iPhones. Apple hasn't sought to provide the applications themselves, but, through their App Store, have created the links for application developers and users to do business.