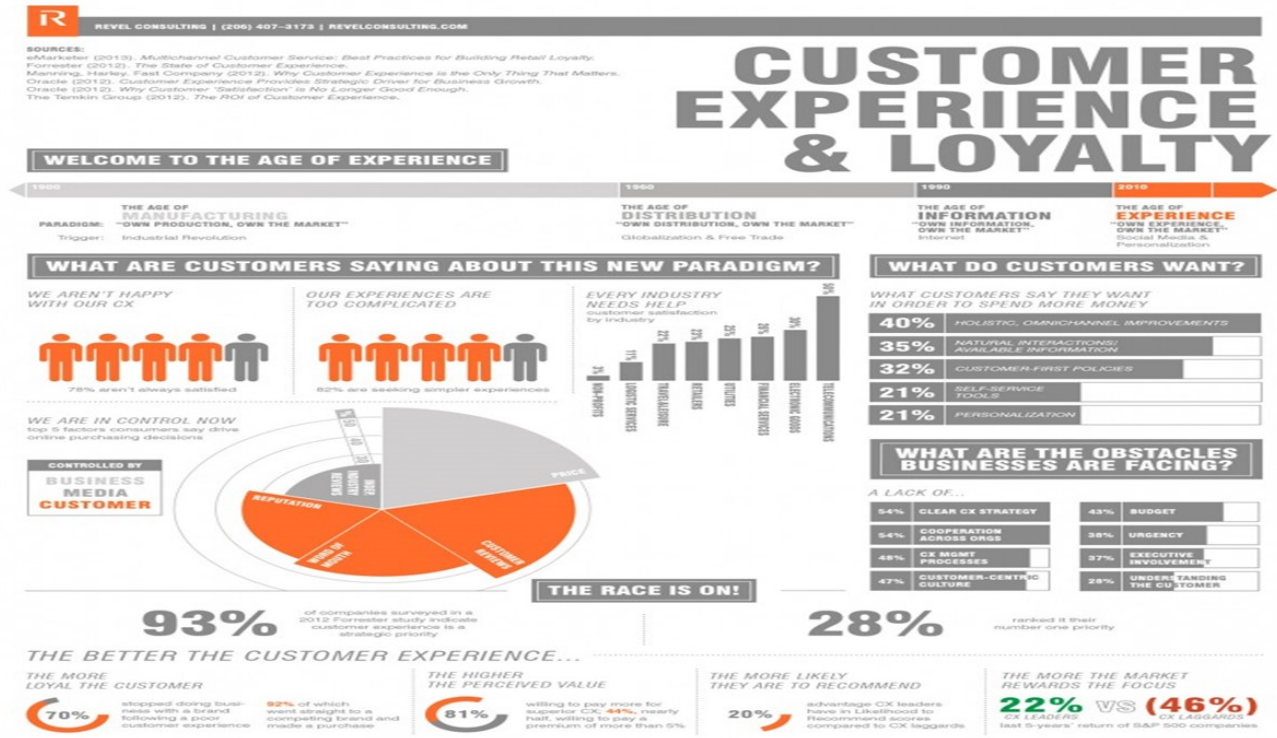


Ten recommendations to creating a better customer experience *

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The size of the service sector, global competition, rising labor and technology costs and demanding customers all force companies to create excellent customer experiences. The challenge firms face today is knowing their customer's definition of service quality and how to deliver that at a reasonable cost to create superior customer value.

Customers use service encounters to assess the quality of a firm's offering. So, how can we "wow" customers?

It's all about the service experience

Seventy percent of customer defections are due to service problems. Improving service quality is like taking vitamins, eating healthy and exercising regularly. Although the results may not be immediate, long-term benefits are significant. Service quality is not a "quick fix," but rather a way of life for companies who are serious about improvement. Here are 10 recommendations that can lead to superior customer value:

1. Co-create services with customers. Learn what customers value by incorporating the "voice-of-the-customer" into the service development process.
2. Focus your improvement programs outward, on market "break-points." By defining and mapping episodes (service cycle), you can see the service experience as the customer sees it. Realize that customers view service as a totality, not an isolated set of activities.
3. Create a tangible representation of service quality. Hertz Gold Plus Rewards communicates a premium, value-added bundle of services to business travelers seeking a hassle-free car rental experience.
4. Use teamwork to promote service excellence — service workers who support one another and achieve together can avoid service burnout.
5. Create a "service-bias" based on key SQ determinants such as professionalism, attitudes/behaviors, accessibility and flexibility, reliability/trustworthiness and service recovery.
6. Develop metrics that are specific in nature, such as a 95 percent on-time delivery, customer wait time or order processing time.
7. Employee selection, job design and training are crucial to building customer satisfaction and SQ. The ability to respond quickly, competently and pleasantly to customers needs to be a priority.
8. Reward quality efforts in marketing. Seek opportunities to reinforce quality behaviors when they occur. Reward employees on the basis of commitment and effort, not just sales outcomes.
9. Think of service as a process, not a series of functions. Service quality occurs when the entire service experience is managed and the organization is aligned to respond accordingly.
10. Integrate customer information across sales channels. The information made available to online and offline service representatives should be consistent.

Checklist — improving service quality

1. Does your company really listen to its customers? Give a specific example of how good listening improved the service experience.
2. Reliability means performing the promised services dependably and accurately. On a 10-point scale, where 1 is unreliable and 10 is perfectly reliable, rate your company and explain why.
3. How well does your company perform the "service basics?"
4. How effectively does your company manage service design — systems, people and the physical environment? Provide an example of how lack of planning in one of these areas resulted in a "fail point" during a customer encounter.
5. Service recovery refers to how effectively companies respond to service failures. Cite an example when a service failure occurred and how it was handled.
6. Teamwork is an important dynamic in sustaining service workers' motivation. How can you improve teamwork in your organization?
7. Internal service is crucial to service improvement, as customer satisfaction often mirrors employee satisfaction. To what extent does your company assess internal service quality?

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