

Customer Intimacy - Get To Know That Customer!



Customer intimacy! What's that? Sounds like one of those Harvard Business School's or Tom Peters' stuff? With the financial meltdown upon us who needs another fad. Come to think of it, the eggheads always come up with one of these management fads every few years. Remember MBO, TQM, QCS, TCS and BPR, to mention but a few. So what's so special about Customer Intimacy or CI? As an organization you can choose to make a few noises about it today, and get back to business as usual tomorrow, knowing fully well that this, too, will soon also pass away. But will it?

Unfortunately for organizations, CI will not pass away. It's a paradigm shift. A shift from the notion that generation of profits is the central goal of business to the notion that creation of value for the customer is the sole purpose. If you do it well the profits will come. CI means quality service and much more. It goes beyond the pursuit of customer satisfaction to the capturing of the customer's very heart and mind. Simply put, it means consistently outperforming the competition, serving the customer with care and passion, exceeding expectations and entirely partnering with the customer in all facets of the business interaction from the cradle to the grave.

Three stories, related below, capture the essence of CI. The first is an emotional story, as told by Laurie Beth Jones, in Jesus CEO. Laurie was talking about Art Huskey, an estate agent in San Diego. "...these friends told mom that Art sold them their first home years ago and in fact had actually 'saved their lives.'" "It seems the elderly couple had both come down with a severe form of flu. It was so debilitating that they could not even pick up a phone to ask for help. Art, after not hearing from them, went to their home and found them dangerously dehydrated. He took personal responsibility for them and even when they returned from hospital brought them chicken soup for weeks. It seems every time I meet someone who knows Art, he has a similar story to tell." Any wonder Art Huskey outsells all other estate agents by five to one where ever he goes?

Tom Peters preaches staying close to the customer. Now Art Huskey would not have saved this elderly couple if he did not practice CI, staying close to his customers. Art must have lost some money by his act of kindness but he gets hundreds of referrals from his grateful customers.

Douglas D. Danforth, former Chairman and CEO of Westinghouse recounted the second story and he was quoted in the Wall Street Journal. It told of an American tourist who bought a compact disc player in a Japanese department store. Opening the carton at her Tokyo host's home that night, she was horrified to find that she had been given a display model - a beautiful case with no innards. The American could hardly wait until morning to take the store to task. But before she could telephone the store the next day, the store manager called her. Discovering the error, the store's vice president had traced the American Express charge slip to the buyer's apartment in New York City, gotten the Tokyo phone number from the apartment sitter, and contacted the surprised American. A team from the store soon arrived. They brought a working compact disc player, a Chopin disc, a set of towels, a box of cakes, and sincere apologies. The woman contrasts that testimony to quality service with a six-month battle she fought with a Manhattan department store. It involved a wrong charge to her account. Most of the battle was done by phone. And the woman was still unsatisfied when she had her Tokyo experience.

Then there is the car salesman Joe Girard. He sold more new cars and trucks, each year, for eleven years running, than any other human being. As Tom Peters told the story in his *In Search of Excellence*, in a typical year, Peters said, Joe sold more than twice as many units as whoever was in second place.

What is Joe's magic? As Peters tells the story, every month throughout the year Joe's customers get a letter from him. It arrives in a plain envelop, always a different size or color. And they open it up and the front of it reads, 'I LIKE YOU'. Inside it says 'Happy New Year from Joe Girard'. He sends a card in February wishing the customers a 'Happy George Washington Birthday'. In March it's 'Happy St. Patrick's Day.' They love the cards. Joe boasts, "You should hear the comments I get on them." Joe is the author of *How to Sell Anything to Anybody* and in that book he elaborates his approach. The book is an eye-opener.

Tom Peters whose book *In Search of Excellence*, written with Robert Waterman Jr., brought the whole idea of quality service down to earth, to the language that can be understood by all, describes twelve attributes or traits of the quality revolution. The first two attributes are "Management's obsession for quality", and "Passionate systems". Management's obsession for quality stresses the importance of practical action to back up the emotional commitment to quality, e.g. never walking past shoddy goods, having passion for the customer. Passionate systems, Peters recognizes is important in the pursuit of quality, for failure "can be brought about by passion without system, or system without passion."

The book describes graphic instances where workers display heroism and passion in their drive to deliver outstanding service. I have two favorites, one is about a Honda worker who, on his way home each evening, straightens up the windshield wiper blades on all the Hondas he passes. He just can't stand to see a flaw in a Honda. Remember, Honda is "Built Without Compromise"; Honda is "One of Life's Best Feelings".

Then there is the Frito-Lay's 10,000-person sales force, which will brave rain, snow, storm, sleet and mud to restock their customers' stores with potato chips to keep the "99.99 percent service level". These are the stuffs passion is made off.

Horst Schulze, the then president of The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company in writing about the need to deliver service with care and sincerity, poses this hypothetical question. He asks, "Suppose I go into a bank to change \$10, and the teller greets me with, 'Yes', not 'Good morning, sir'. I say, 'I want to change \$10', which she does. She gives me my correct change. But I want something more. I want the teller to understand my values as a customer - to understand it intellectually and emotionally - and to treat me accordingly. That's the service aspect, the caring aspect that comes on top of the product. The product is giving correct change. But if the teller then adds, 'Sir, I'm happy to give you the change, and please have a wonderful day', then he has served me. Then he's delivering both quality and service". What is necessary to note is that there is a gulf of difference between fact and perception, and as it has always been emphasized, perception is more powerful than facts. Show the customer that you care in simple powerful ways: thank you sir/madam; have a nice day, love to the kids, smile, smile, smile, etc, etc.

W. Edwards Deming, the originator of the quality concept emphasized time and again that top management holds the key to quality. In one of his very last articles, printed in the Executive Excellence Magazine, Deming, as in the past, stressed, "quality is made in the boardroom". Hear Deming, "A bank that failed last week may have had excellent operations - speed at the tellers' windows, few mistakes in account statements, but the cause of failure was bad management, not operations. Everyone is in favor of improving quality, but many people misunderstand quality as evident by looking at some of their suggestions for improving quality. Just add automation, new machinery, more computers, gadgets, hard work, best efforts, merit systems, MBO, MBR, rankings, inspections, incentive pay, work standards, specification, motivation. What's wrong with these suggestions? The fallacies are obvious - every one of them focuses on systems, not the customer!"

Top management must show through policies adopted in the company that all decisions are for the comfort and convenience of customers, staff must be empowered to decide in favor of the customer, but above all else, the culture must be such that staff are able to question the way we do things around here. Unless staff are able to question the status quo, pretty little will change.

Today, customer satisfaction guarantees very little. Indeed customer satisfaction today is regarded merely as an admission ticket. The battle arena has shifted. Customer intimacy is the ultimate ground where the battle for the hearts and minds of customers will be fought in this century and beyond. Technology, which makes it possible to gather every conceivable information about a customer, opens up exciting new frontiers for building unbreakable bonds between the company and the customer. With all the information at your disposal, it becomes possible to pursue cradle to grave customer strategies, tailor service to the customer's standard, needs and values, and anticipate his next and future needs. Above all, CI enables you to prepare

to deliver service to the generation yet unborn. A customer intimate company has a permanent place in the heart of the customer making it near impossible for another company to find a welcoming fertile ground to germinate. This is the key to permanent success and the time to begin to think and act in customer intimate ways is now.

Paul Uduk is the Chief Executive Officer of Vision & Talent International, Nigeria's leading learning and performance consultancy, and the founder of Paradise Bookshops, Nigeria's largest bookshop chain. He has published and consulted actively in the areas of service quality and design, and teaches in these areas locally and internationally, including for the UNDP. He is the Creator of The Wealth Beyond Your Imagination Audio CD, and his best selling books include Bridges to the Customer's Heart, and The Gods of Quality Strike Back. Prior to setting up the Vision & Talent Group, he was a banker with one of Nigeria's top 10 banks. His current research interest is on forces that engender corporate enthusiasm, agility, and the will to prevail through excellence.