Managing Customer Experiences

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One area that the big chains do well in is consistency. Consistency within a particular branch, and consistency between branches. A Starbucks coffee in London is remarkably similar to one in Lancaster; a pepperoni pizza from Pizza Hut is pretty much identical in Harrow and Harrogate; and a Subway sandwich selected in Exeter will taste the same as one in Edinburgh.

These organisations, and others go to *enormous* lengths to ensure product consistency. It protects their image, their brand, their relationship with their customer base. And, let's face it, it's pretty easy to do. Particularly compared to the area that they most often fail in - the consistency of service.

Quite a few miles north of home, but just a little south of a client, lies a beautiful little market town. In it, and open early, is a branch of one of the major coffee chains, and, if I'm a little early for a meeting, I pop in to gather my thoughts. The two guys serving in there are, every time, brilliant. Cheerful, chatty, considerate. They are the reason I go there. But it's not always like that in this company's other outlets...and they know it.

Last time I was in there, there was a laminated printout of a letter from a customer on the counter. The highlighted sections accurately reflected my views of the team there - great guys, always helpful, and a pleasure to be with. However, the author had contrasted this to another experience with the same chain at the other ed of the country, where they'd had no eye contact, no smile, no greeting, and the staff had served whilst carrying on conversations amongst themselves. It got me thinking...

Standardising ingredients is easy. Standardising machinery is easy. Standardising production processes is easy. But how on earth do you standardise people?

The answer, of course, is that you don't. Do that, and, however hard you try, you end up with people who ask you whether you "want fries with that" when you pop in for a mid-morning coffee. But there are things you can do.

Recruit with care

Recruitment is your starting point. Attract people with the right values by displaying them in your organisation. Select them with as much, if not more, care as you apply to selecting your coffee beans. Exhort your values, train people in expressing them, allow them to do so, and ruthlessly monitor performance.

Getting the right people into the shop is far more vital than getting the right beans in there.

Apply values, not rules

Every single customer is different. Applying rules to human interactions removes the humanity from them; human interaction becomes a mechanical process, not a beautiful, evolving, organic experience. The correct answer to the question "how should you treat a customer" is "I don't know - it depends on the customer". Some what a quick cup of coffee in a plastic cup so they can run on; some want to be tempted with a chocolate brownie; and some want a cheeky wink and a flirt. You can't create a process to manage even those three, let alone the myriad possibilities that exist.

So don't try. Define your customer service values, and throw the rulebook away.

Reward the right stuff

Do you care how long it takes people to get served? Do you care how items are placed on a tray? Do you care every order is delivered perfectly? You might, but who cares what you care about?

What's important is what *your customers* care about. If an order is delivered and it's wrong, but it's dealt with with such flair that the customer ends up feeling warm and fuzzy, no problem. If a customer just wants a mug of coffee, to that individual, it doesn't matter if there is a napkin on the saucer. If the queue is a fun, chatty, entertaining place to be, and customers in front are being served with flair and skill, your customers might actually enjoy the wait.

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