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Demand for customer service training on the increase

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'The customer is always right' is the retailers' mantra – which is why customer service training is enjoying a growth spurt.

The intensity of competition for the nation's customers is tougher than ever, and in an increasingly service-led economy, all types of organisations are focusing on how they can improve interaction with the public.

A recent study by US consultant Novations Group shows that demand for customer relations training is growing, with 64% of HR managers questioned reporting a rise.

Martyn Sloman, training, learning and development adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), says that customer service skills are now a bottom-line issue that can define a company against its competition.

Staff deployment

"Generally, all the evidence points to a service-led, knowledge economy with organisations competing on the level of service offered to customers. Success here is almost entirely dependent on the deployment of staff.

"It's an area where business need has quickly driven training provision and that's really thanks to customer expectations and competition. I think there has been a huge change for the better in customer service in the UK over the last few years and training is becoming very widespread," he says.

Sloman adds that customer service skills have grown massively in the workforce over the last decade, but that it can be a difficult area to define because of the wide variety of factors used to assess a good experience.

After all, everybody likes to be treated differently, and what is seen as caring, personal service by one person may be seen as being over-familiar by another.

Different skills

"It's about context and understanding how to deal with a range of situations. Because there are so many factors involved with customer care and such a variety of potential scenarios, it demands many different skills.

"The traits required are very trainable, and they are so important now because customer services are becoming an absolute business imperative," he explains.

However, generic training schemes are not always the best way to develop customer services, and Sloman cites schemes at companies such as Hilton and Harvey Nichols, which use peer feedback and management support. "A lot of these skills are acquired and refined in the actual workforce rather than by formal training schemes," he adds.

Richard Leech, head of learning at [global training firm Grass Roots](#), has seen a rise in the number of companies looking to use customer service training.

"About 70-80% of everything we do now is about improving a company's interaction with customers. Many companies have identified customer service as the key differentiator against their competition.

"Someone like Barclays has about 30,000 staff dealing with 18 million customers per day. That means that customer service training can have a huge impact on the bottom line," he explains.

Best practice

The company has developed a set of processes and models to promote best practice in customer handling, which explore staff attitude and how to promote the brand. He believes that training in this area is largely about teaching people how to react in any given situation and reading the signs of every customer.

"It's about applying these principles and making sure staff appreciate all the nuances that can arise when dealing with customers.

"Different types of customers want to be treated in different ways, so making assumptions about how people want to be treated is very dangerous. Employees need to be trained to recognise these subtleties and ask the right questions," he says.

He is also a firm believer in stringent metrics and urges all businesses to measure the quality of their customer services through appropriate measures, such as mystery shopping and a satisfaction index.

"Of course, the ultimate business metric is overall customer retention. We have to be very tough on

measuring the impact of training otherwise what's the point in doing it?" he adds.

Chris Horsman, managing director of International training company [Balanced Learning](#), says both private and public sector organisations now invest heavily in customer service skills.

So much so, that he believes UK customer service levels are now as high as anywhere else in the world.

"I've spent half my working life in the US and I honestly think the UK is now further on in how we deal with customers. There's a greater degree of subtlety and sophistication in the way British firms work now," he claims.

He thinks training should focus on getting a consistent message across to customers through the employees, as well as making front-line staff the face of the organisation.

"People buy from people they like and I think it's vital that staff can act as the face of the organisation. A strong customer service offering is potentially as important as price these days.

"The most important thing is helping staff to understand the needs of the customer. There's a real element of psychology in reading the situation," he says.

Some of the key points in his training courses include active listening, customer empathy, understanding the brand and making a powerful first impression.

Stimulus for debate

Training firm [Steps Drama](#) uses professional actors to help get the message across and exploits drama as a stimulus for debate. Actors are used for one-to-one role playing but Steps also use forum theatre to demonstrate difficult customer situations.

Simon Thomson, a director at the firm, says any training must try to build on existing success and involve the staff as much as possible.

"People can be suspicious of customer service training and look at it as an accusation that they are doing something wrong. A lot of our training encourages leadership at every level so that staff can take ownership of the organisational aims.

"Without customers you haven't got a business so it's incredibly important to get it right. The lines between internal and external customers are blurring so more employers are looking at training," Thomson says.

He argues that in the past some firms were too complacent about how they should deal with customers and often saw staff development as simply a cost issue.

Ongoing process

Suzanne Brewer, head of customer services at [Knowledge Pool](#), has overhauled the training for her staff and says it is vital to make it an ongoing process.

At Knowledge Pool, training is tied-into the recruitment and induction process and is then backed up with mentoring and monthly evaluation.

"We measure and evaluate our people's soft and hard customer service skills based on set competencies each month. This ensures that it's an on-going development process," Brewer says.

"It's not about meeting customer expectations, it's about exceeding them. You need to make sure that staff are trained to ask the right questions and work out the best solutions so they can go the extra mile."

Customer services are at the heart of UK business, and with consumer expectations higher than ever, companies need to make sure training in this area is a corner stone of corporate policy.

Case study: World Duty Free

Retail firm World Duty Free has used a unique coaching programme to help drive up customer service skills and improve sales by more than £2m in just six months.

The £200,000 scheme focuses on the phrase 'think customer', and uses the real workplace as the sales floor classroom.

The pilot scheme at Heathrow Terminal 3 helped staff serve an extra 50,000 customers and proved so successful that it is now being rolled out across the firm's 65 airport stores.

The initiative, designed by [Momentum Development](#) and training firm [the Difference](#), uses practical coaching workshops to help managers lead their teams.

These develop the skills of line managers in supporting great service where it really matters – on the sales floor – using timely and constructive feedback to create a coaching culture.

The company also introduced 'coach the coach' sessions to help managers communicate and convey the right techniques to front line staff.

Jacquie Dyer, head of resourcing and development at World Duty Free, says the sessions helped the firm win the National Customer Service Award for Retail.

"Every World Duty Free employee is encouraged and trained to always 'think customer'. Despite winning the award last year and having our Aberdeen team shortlisted for it this year, we will not rest on our laurels and are committed to continuously improving the experience of our stores for our shoppers," she says.

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