



# “Customer Care” is old hat

Liam Brown explains why he thinks “customer care” is old hat and needs to be replaced with something else.

**C**ustomer Care is old hat. Well, it *is* old hat, isn't it? I mean, who finds the term helpful any more? What does it mean... what does one *do* exactly? Am I a *customer carer*? How about “customer service” or perhaps “service quality”? A little better. It helps me think about dimensions of measurement: the physical side of service as well as the psychological aspects. But how do you know you're good at it? Who says?

Lots of questions. There are so many ways of coming at this – even the term ‘customer’ doesn't come easy to us in the ELT world – where does one begin? Looking at the literature, guidance doesn't come easily: “Quality is free” says one writer. “Quality is whatever the customer says it is” says another. Clearly this isn't going to be easy

## Lessons from the past one

Magdi Mohamed cut a dashing figure. Tall, elegant, well spoken in English and Arabic, immaculately turned out in suit and silk tie – he really looked the part, and no time better than when he was standing in a classroom on day 1 of term welcoming a new group of students. Useful information, social events to look forward to and finally an exhortation to visit him in his office for a chat “any time you like – before lessons, after lessons, even

during lessons if you want!” Egyptian by birth, he was Office Manager in the Jeddah language school I worked at many years ago. As Senior Teacher at the time I got to see Magdi do his welcome many times and the experience never failed to impress. There was always a warm murmur of quiet satisfaction from the students who felt touched by the real thing: a warm welcome.

Eight weeks later, at the end of term, there he would be again visiting every group, wishing them a fond farewell (for those not registering for the next term) or brief adieu until the next term 2 weeks hence (for those who happily *were* registering for next term). Magdi would be prepared for this visit, armed with the names of all the students who had achieved A grades in their final tests. “Abdulla Al Ghamdi! What can I say? A fantastic result. And Mohamed Al Dosari!” he would say, glancing at his cue card. I used to call this the *Magdi moment*.

In between these two encounters many students would have spent many a half hour dropping in on Magdi in his office, chatting away, bitter coffee almost on tap. His two sofas always seemed full of people on their way to or from class. In this way he got to know almost the entire student population, which by some feat of memory he could, of course, greet by name with some familiarity.

Years later, researching trends in customer care for a training course I was designing, I came across the legendary Ritz Carlton ‘way’ with customer care. Struck by their bold motto: “We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen,” their 3 Steps of Service seemed uncannily familiar:

1. A warm and sincere greeting. Use the guest name if and when possible.
2. Anticipation and Compliance with guest needs.
3. Fond farewell. Give them a warm good-bye and use their names, if and when possible.

There he was again – this was pure Magdi. The warmth and sincerity, the desire to be helpful, using names wherever possible. There is one other aspect to this story that comes back to me as I think about it. From time to time we had management meetings to look at things like pricing, curriculum, staffing disposition, the state of the market – all the *stuff* we were supposed to be deciding on and indeed reporting on to our masters in HQ. Thing is, who knew? I mean who *really knew* the state of the market and all that. Not me, that's for sure. As for what the students thought... I was equally in the dark. But Magdi wasn't. The things he knew! The times we turned to him, sounding him out on a price increase or for news of a competitor, or feelings about a

coursebook. Our London bound reports were always insightful and we liked to think, accurate.

Here was lesson 1 for my course. Lesson 2 wasn't very much far away.

## Lessons from the past two

Take a minute or two to think of your worst customer service nightmares. Chances are, like me, you'll think of things like:

1. Unanswered email enquiries
2. Poor or inadequate information given
3. Customers waiting in long queues for service
4. Rude or improper attitudes

Now think of how most people define customer service or 'customer care'. Usually it involves something like: "anticipating, meeting or exceeding the needs and expectations of our customers in the most effective way." At least that's how most textbooks come at it. Is there, I wonder, a strong element in most minds that customer care or customer service is about *keeping promises* made to customers? Information will be accurate. The teacher will be on time. Registration will be ship shape, no long queues.

Now move the perspective a little and something interesting is revealed: think of the customer service move a competitor might make that would be your worst nightmare? Again, answers usually are something like this:

A competitor:

- Identifies a critical service for our customers which we missed
- Creates a culture of cooperation and collaboration that brings them closer to our customers
- Generates better customer information and uses it to offer new services to our customers

The nightmare, if you haven't spotted it, is in the word *our*. Now

this is something else entirely. This isn't "anticipating, meeting ...etc" Is there, a strong sense in this perspective of building a relationship with the customer, perhaps even understanding the customer almost better than they understand themselves? This isn't merely about fulfilling promises. This has moved way beyond that. The 'acid test', says Jonathan Byrnes (2003) of MIT, is the customer's *future* behaviour.

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If that's so, the question now is: how do we build a relationship with our customers so that we remain responsive to their needs over time. Well, we could try the survey, that old stalwart of marketing theory and practice. That once a year snapshot, the 60 questions that fixes or freezes our business world for a moment to allow close inspection. Have you ever tried one? Question 47, 48, 49... only 11 more to go.

What does the survey tell us of the shy 12-year old student with not much English who is really keen to get on, but can't quite cope with large boisterous groups. What can it know of the harassed parent rushing to enroll her 16 year old child at lunch with two other kids in tow?

Lesson Number 2 tells me something about being close to the customer, (or "intimate" as the literature phrases it), about getting to the 'voice of the customer': How do we ensure that we are hearing

what we need to, to make the connections that matter for our customers?

## Getting things right

Whatever the definitions and terminologies, for me, the one that works best is "customer focused working". It works because it refers to something we all do, at our best. It's not a department or group (*Customer Services*) and it avoids any notion of *service*. It simply means everything I do is done for the customer.

The term also covers the ground many regard as integral to quality (expected or perceived) such as professionalism and skill, attitude and behaviour, accessibility and flexibility, reliability and trustworthiness and getting it right. Customer focused working. But where does it come from? Can I train it?

Esther O'Halloran, head of recruitment and retention at Pret, (quoted in a case study\* of her company) says: "We're often asked about the secret of our customer service training. There is no secret. In fact there is no customer service training. Instead we employ people with personality who we think have the potential to give genuinely good service – people who like mixing with other people, who are good humoured and like to enjoy themselves".

That's all very well but there must be things we can actually do, as managers. I worked for a manager once who wouldn't allow me to provide immediate feedback questionnaires for students (mostly on short "skills through English" programmes) on the grounds that we wouldn't be able to act on what they told us, and "in any case, we're educationalists, we know best. We simply lay out our wares and they will come". This view isn't uncommon in education across the spectrum, including EFL. It is misguided and does a disservice to students – our customers.

On the other hand we aren't 'manufacturers'. We are a service and there is an important difference between the two. For the manufacturer there is a predictability to the process. Get the specifications drawn up and off you go. Of course you may consult customers when devising specifications and may even tailor products to suit individual tastes, but customers largely stay out of the way until the goods are ready. That's pretty much how it works for most situations. In service contexts, however, customers are part of the process. When booking holidays, checking into hotels or withdrawing money from cash machines, they do any number of infuriating, unreasonable and unpredictable things. They demand aisle seats or rooms near the fire escape or put their cards into machines upside down. They don't do all the questions on the placement test and their shyness masks a higher level of oral proficiency. They miss the end of term test yet insist on progressing to the next level. They frustrate any system imposed on them.

## Service Focused Customers

Frustrating they may be, but customers are the only real key to understanding what we do and Jonathan Byrnes\* suggests the way to success is some clear thinking about what it feels like to walk in the customer's shoes.

You might imagine there's not a whole lot to see. Actually there's quite a bit. As this example shows.

Near where I used to work in Singapore a few years ago, was a busy city-centre full-service post office, serving a wide range of customers. The busiest time was that period between noon and 2pm when people would fit in a visit during their lunch break. The queues needless to say could be horrendous, but they never felt so. Each week there was something new and all aimed at making the

customer experience that little bit better. They were getting pretty good at it too. People noticed: *Creative ideas for traditional service* was the new slogan built into their logo.

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When I asked where all this was coming from, a senior manager told me "from staff. And the ideas come from just watching the customers, seeing how they interact with all the dimensions of the service we offer". They watched how customers actually behaved in the long queues and came up with measures to actually shorten them (the uniformed floorwalker selling stamps and giving information) or make the wait seem less long (Mr Bean on the television).

This idea of *watching* ties in with a last lesson: attention to detail, especially the small things. One American approach – SERVQUAL – covers this ground with a focus on 5 key determinants: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The last two are interesting as they touch on a point made by Esther O'Halloran I mentioned earlier: your staff. 'Assurance' refers to the skills and knowledge of staff, their courtesy and friendliness, while 'empathy' involves a notion of approachability and the effort put in by staff to understand the customers needs and to provide some personalised attention.

## Customers R Us

I started by saying customer care is old hat. I said that "customer

focused working" is a term I prefer because it refers to something I can do, a way of being, an attitude.

As we saw, examples of this abound – the smile, the use of names, being approachable, thinking about (even being obsessive about) detail, the warm welcome and fond farewell. These are not always easy to come at in our world: some even find the word *customer* a bit hard on the tongue. That may be. However, some things are so basic that we can all sign up with understanding. For example, for managers:

- Remember there are two groups of people who know the business better than you do. They are the customers and the people who deal with them. You need to talk to both, often.
- Encourage complaints and act on them. Complaining customers are a valuable source of market intelligence.
- Invest in your *Magdi moments*
- Invest in your *watching time*

A last thought about attention to detail. In a hotel room on a recent trip, I accidentally kicked my pen under the bed. Groping around trying to reach it, my hand touched on a card which I brought up to look at. "Hi!" the smiling cartoon on the card said. "Yep, we clean under here too!"

## References

Byrnes J, 2003, "Out-of-the-Box-Customer Service" in *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, July

\* The case study referred to was written by Alex Hill (University of Kingston). AMD Publishing

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