

Looking Ahead: Employee issues will dominate the attention of customer service managers in 2008

What are some of the important challenges that customer service management will face in 2008? In the view of most of the experts we spoke to for our annual Looking Ahead article, the leading challenges will be employee-related issues — recruiting and retaining quality staff, engaging reps in their work, boosting performance, training and coaching employees, and improving management's coaching skills.

But employee issues aren't the only concern. Following are two additional perspectives on the year ahead.

Providing hands-on customer service

Renee Evenson, author of *Award-Winning Customer Service* believes that for a variety of economic and cultural reasons — including a cautious buyer market, more competition for the spending dollar, and higher expectations caused by the competitive market — customers have lost confidence. Managers who understand this and take steps to develop and restore trust with consumers will develop a loyal customer base in the New Year.

Offering exceptional customer service is one way to develop trust and confidence. "Listen to what customers are saying to you, and act on what they say," Evenson says. "Change what needs to be changed and work harder than you ever have before to restore customer confidence."

Three strategies for building consumer trust that Evenson suggests are:

Building employee morale.

"Managers need to motivate sales

and customer service teams to keep the momentum going," she says. "Develop a strong team by communicating well to employees — this also means listening. Don't sugar coat what you tell employees. Talk to them about the consumer market. Help them understand that it is more important than ever to value each customer.

Invest in training and coaching. "Managers understand the value and impact that knowledgeable, effective, and efficient employees have on customer's satisfaction yet they sometimes lack the skills or motivation needed to fully develop employees — and then continue developing them," Evenson says. "Training should be continual. Managers need to understand that everyone in their organization must know how to give great customer service, whether customers are internal or external. Train in products, services, and policies first. Once employees know how to find the right solution for each customer,

train them in how to give exceptional customer service. And the only way for managers to know if everyone is giving great customer service is to be there observing and giving feedback."

Provide hands-on management. "Managers must put in the time to 'be there' for their service reps, or they will never be able to gauge accurately the level of customer service their employees are providing," Evenson says. "Customer service is going to be more important than ever in 2008, and managers will have to be a hands-on part of a successful company's service offering."

An array of challenges for customer service

Trevor Spunt, a senior managing consultant for IBM Global Business Services, believes that customer service managers will face a range of challenges in 2008, some of which will be industry-specific and others of which will be more general.

In many fields he sees potential

problems arising for customer service out of an aging workforce and aging customer populations.

Other common service problems that he identifies include:

- An increase in credit problems that will increase the number of calls to customer service and change the nature of those calls. Spunt asks: “Are processes available to respond to this reality?”

- Customer expectations will be established from interactions with

leading practice companies, and companies that fail to keep up will look like they are providing poor service in comparison.

- Staff turnover will continue to be a problem because companies do not have processes in place to optimize hiring or retention.

- Contact center managers will be working with the wrong metrics and relying too much on “average” data rather than understanding and acting upon outliers.

- Many contact center managers have insufficient information to make key process changes. For instance, only a few pursue “Six Sigma” reviews, Spunt says.

In addition to the above items, Spunt adds that customer service managers often don’t make the best use of technology investments — in scheduling, routing, self-service, etc. — and need to get better at using the technologies that they already have. ■