



Service: Waiting for the promise to come true!

How often have you been pleasantly surprised with services rendered around a purchasing experience? And how often have your expectations been disappointed? Whether it is our selective memory or raising expectations in a world where almost 70% of the value created stem from services, is irrelevant from the customers' point of view. They expect amenities from one industry to be available in others and demand excellence in fulfilment. Since services typically are high involvement interactions that require customers' personal participation in the process, **positive or negative experiences stay alive longer and shape the image of a company much more than most communication experts are willing to admit.**

On the other hand, companies expect to increase their sales and profits with services, either directly marketing it or using it to lock existing or future buyers into a business relationship they cannot easily leave. But getting there has proven to be difficult to say the least. **Proliferation of programs with doubtful returns, failure to fulfil the promises made in glossy brochures and insufficient speed of innovation due to inappropriate organisational structures let many companies take a second look.**

Even new business models stripping all usual services you got used to from a given product in favour of lower prices, such as Easy Jet or Ryanair, have become widely successful.

While in consumer markets the split between buyers looking for just cheap products and consumers willing to pay for extra service seems more pronounced, in the B2B world buyers require more and more integrated solutions, not just products.

The challenges though remain the same and originate from lack of attention and competencies required for successful service business.

It is fascinating to watch **companies spending lavishly on new customer marketing and at the same time forget to invest in after sales service**

units who are dealing with existing customers that need replacement of their products sooner or later. To address the dynamics in services, you don't have the time you normally spend on product development. Some organisations take the short cut and inevitably fail to deliver a relevant and reliable offering. **Rapid prototyping instead of tedious design enables learning by doing and iteration towards the key elements of the value proposition.** This is possible, since investments and other risks are much smaller in service prototyping than in typical product development.

No matter how good you are in prototyping, the service product is a living one. Despite careful blue-printing and other methods, you will uncover business situations you have not considered in your original design. So sensing these exceptions and reacting fast with enhancements and training to your front line are a critical competence in a service oriented environment.

More often though you discover, that your organisation is unable to deliver with consistency and quality. Chances are that you are still too much functionally instead of process-oriented. Key metrics are missing to be able to judge whether you consistently deliver what you promise. And how can an organisation improve its performance if you don't have the feedback to let you know where to improve? This brings us right back to the last, but most important reason, why services are so hard to improve: so much of its perceived quality depends on the attitude and ability of the people delivering it.

A renowned speaker on delighting customers as the major attitude to be instilled into organisations replied to my question, how to practically do it, that typically men are always looking for instruments! If this is typical for men, then I happily confess to be one. Without it, improvements are left to chance, which is exactly, what many customers experience.

Service attitude towards customers is not a result of company aspirations, but how well front line people are serviced and treated by their own company. While many organisations are now really conscious about satisfaction of their sales force, service personnel in customer service, repairs or complaints are still the underdogs. Feedback from customers gets stuck between front line and middle management and is regarded as nuisance rather than incredible opportunity to introduce a win-win situation between customers' and employees' interests: striving to be the best!