



More staff or more efficient staff?

by [Martin Ellingham](#)

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Staff on the frontline are the face of your company, and customer service staff in particular have the important role of putting things right when they go wrong. If a customer has a poor experience here, it could make or break their relationship with you.

Demands on frontline customer service staff are increasing as consumers expect a higher standard of response. If you cannot provide it, your customers will simply look for other companies who can satisfy their expectations. Martin Ellingham, Respond Product Manager at Aptean, discusses why empowering frontline staff ultimately results in higher standards of customer care and overall profit. It's about staff quality, not quantity.

Today, it has never been easier for consumers to change their supplier or service provider. This has become particularly apparent in free markets in recent years, as governments have attempted to break up oligopolies of numerous industries – for example energy providers and financial services – to increase the competition and ultimately benefit consumers by enabling a wider range of choice.

In years gone by, many businesses could rely on low customer churn because it was both inconvenient and difficult to switch supplier or provider, but now it is a relatively pain free process with agencies and switching services literally knocking on customers' doors.

With that, how a business interacts with its customers and their problems is fast becoming of greater significance. Customers don't necessarily want to switch providers, but if they feel that inadequate customer service is forcing their hand, they will – and they won't be coming back.

A business' frontline is the first and the best opportunity to either reverse a negative situation or build on top of a good situation. Therefore, frontline staff need to be operating at a level that can both handle the demand and satisfy customer queries effectively in order to reduce churn and keep customers loyal.

Depending on what study you read, the cost of gaining a new customer compared to retaining an existing one is about 10 to 20 times more expensive for a business. But what many studies do not account for are the long term ramifications of losing a customer to a competitor. Consider a bank or building society; many customers will potentially be committed to one for decades. If poor customer service results in a number of customers looking elsewhere, it could leave a significant hole in a business' long term financial projections and results.

A single click can send a bad review around the world

The challenge of providing satisfactory customer service has been exacerbated by the evolving digital landscape and how it now essentially dictates brand reputation.

Customer service departments are no longer a 9-5 operation; many are already running 24/7. The nature in which customers get the attention of their service providers has never been broader or more varied, both online and through the more traditional channels like phone calls and letters.

Now, there is nowhere for a company to hide if a customer is dissatisfied. Evidence of poor customer service no longer dies out once it has done the rounds at the coffee shop, office or gym – it lives on in the virtual world as a permanent reminder to anyone researching their next service provider.

It presents a real challenge for businesses, and has dramatically increased the reliance on their frontline staff. If customer service representatives are not adequately trained or do not have the resources to effectively handle customer interaction across several different channels, it could lead to a serious breakdown in customer trust.

As businesses have adapted to these developments, expectations have risen. We as consumers want answers quickly. We want immediate access to real people. We want them to be aware of our situation and have solutions tailored to our specific requests. No matter how strong a staff member's personal skills might be, customers always expect more. Apologies and empathy may pacify the customer in the short term – be it face to-face or digitally – but it does not solve the whole problem.

To ensure truly content customers, those skills need to be complemented with the expertise that the customer ultimately wants. Frontline staff need to be empowered with support that genuinely makes their jobs easier while providing exemplary service.

It is no longer a numbers game. More customer service staff does not necessarily fulfil customer expectations. More informed, more efficient staff – that is the answer.

Embracing technology for an efficiency drive

With this digital age comes the need for customer service staff to be technologically equipped – with technologies that really benefit their capability to keep customers happy across the ever expanding list of communication channels.

For frontline staff, there are any number of queries that they could receive via a call, email or face-to-face enquiry. It is impossible for them to know every single answer to every single situation off the top of their heads, and they should not be expected to.

But that does not mean they cannot communicate some form of useful information to the customer. A vague response that delays things further – such as “I’ll have to go and find out” – hardly inspires confidence in the customer that the business is doing everything in its power to help them in a timely, effective manner. For staff on the frontline, understanding why an issue has happened is not easy; understanding why when they are only armed with basic summary information is even harder.

By utilising holistic Complaints Management software, the frontline – and as a result the overall business – will feel considerable benefits. This is because it truly integrates the whole setup into a manageable and easily accessible format.

It gives staff the ability to provide customers with instant updates, rather than making them wait for an answer. If the problem cannot be solved instantly, the software can streamline the redirection of a customer complaint to the correct subject matter expert. Company-wide system updates within the software can provide clarity into how similar issues have been resolved – resolution information captured at first point of contact is logged, so the customer need not wait for an answer that already exists.

For large companies whose customer service teams are spread far and wide, this kind of streamlined internal communication is vital in driving complaints handling efficiency.

By investing in the right tools which improve the frontline’s effectiveness, it will prove to customers that company profits are being reinvested into areas that will be there to help them – eradicating any perceptions that the profits are simply lining the shareholders’ pockets.

Short-term action for long-term prosperity

Businesses need to separate themselves from the crowd, and doing so means investing in customer service that exceeds the competition. Consumers have never been better informed about the products and services they use as well as their rights, and ignoring that will be to the long-term detriment of the company.

Simply hiring more customer service staff is not the solution to improving complaints handling efficiency. In fact, adding more components to an already inefficient system will go only go towards making things worse.

The key is to identify ways to make staff more efficient. This means implementing inter-connected software systems that allow greater detail to be captured, without disrupting a slick customer-facing experience.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but enhancing staff capabilities through a complaints handling restructure does not have to be costly, particularly in the context of the long term gains of doing so. By working with complaints handling management experts to tailor a software infrastructure that improves frontline customer interaction, businesses will gain customers' trust – and acquire their loyalty for years to come.

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