
Customer support services' next horizon: a commentary

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Companies must reimagine the central role of customer support services as they seek to strengthen customer relationships and gain competitive advantage. Sheth *et al.* (this issue) further this important discussion in their editorial. Their editorial can be viewed through a conceptual lens with five interconnected elements.

First, a service is a performance. The core benefit to customers – in live entertainment, transportation, legal advice and other domains – is intangible. Customers of services buy a *promise* of performance, by paying for the service *before* experiencing it. Customers for manufactured goods also buy a performance promise, but they usually can assess it beforehand – by test-driving a car, for example, or trying on clothing. For service firms especially, customers' confidence in the service is their most precious asset. Companies that underinvest in after-sale service support ultimately jeopardize customers' trust. It is foolish.

Second, serving customers creates value. Customers perceive value as benefits they receive for burdens they endure. Burdens have components that are monetary (price) and non-monetary (inconvenience, unreliable service). Companies succeed by delivering superior value – maximizing customer benefits and minimizing burdens. Deficient customer support services weaken how customers assess value when they need help. Conceiving of value as “benefits versus burdens” makes clear how firms can offer low prices but still be seen as offering low value (Berry *et al.*, 2019). For instance, customers' anticipation of long waits whenever they need to contact Company X may cause them to switch to Company Y – the burdens outweigh the benefits.

Third, all companies create value for customers through performance of services. Some companies, such as airlines, sell only services. Others, such as manufacturers, sell services that directly generate revenue from credit, maintenance, repair or other activities in addition to goods. Still others offer services strictly to *facilitate* the sale of goods – for example, with delivery, installation, warranties or call-center assistance. Sheth *et al.* (this issue) emphasize that customer service centers may be able to directly generate revenue by selling services to other firms. That is certainly true. But excellent customer support services contribute to profitability not only through direct revenue generation but also by indirectly facilitating the sale of goods. A firm seeking to sell customer support services to other firms must, as a first priority, support its own customers effectively.

Fourth, the internet has dramatically reshaped customers' expectations for convenience. What once seemed fast is now slow (Berry *et al.*, 2019). Customers' time and effort are nonmonetary burdens; slow service is low value. Even though service convenience is integral to firms' competitiveness, many companies' post-purchase customer support services are plodding – long waits on hold for a customer-service phone rep, online businesses that offer no phone assistance at all, week-long delays for in-home internet technical support. Few operational innovation questions are more important to companies today than “How can we make it easier for customers to do business with us?” This includes making it easier for customers to:

Financial Support: None.

Conflict of Interest: None.



European Journal of Marketing
Vol. 54 No. 7, 2020
pp. 1805-1806
© Emerald Publishing Limited
0309-0566
DOI 10.1108/EJM-07-2020-971

- make purchase decisions (decision convenience);
- access the service (access convenience);
- pay (transaction convenience);
- experience the service (benefit convenience); and
- receive needed assistance after the purchase (post-purchase convenience) (Berry *et al.*, 2002; Berry *et al.*, 2019).

As J. Walker Smith wrote, “Convenience is the criterion for assessing new technologies. Whatever other benefits they deliver, greater convenience must be part of the basic value proposition” (Smith, 2018).

Fifth, post-purchase service quality is irrelevant without a customer to service. I commend Sheth *et al.* (this issue) for emphasizing after-sale service quality as a key to retaining customers. But why stop at the Chief Customer Support Officer and standalone Customer Support Business Unit that the authors recommend? Service excellence is essential throughout *all* customer experiences, from pre-purchase through post-purchase. Why not create a position of Chief Customer Experience Officer (CCEO), who reports to the CEO and heads an integrated department that *includes* human resources, information technology, customer insights, after-sale customer support and possibly other units? Some companies do have CCEOs, although likely not with the expansive portfolio just described (Yohn, 2019). Given the need for seamless integration among functions, such as IT and HR, to deliver exceptional customer experiences, this type of organizational structure is likely to evolve in the future.

Customer support services must now be seen as integral to every function of the service business, not relegated to a post-purchase silo. Delivering high-quality support at all customer touchpoints throughout the service experience – and showing customers that they can *expect* such quality – is a strategic imperative for service firms, from their frontline reps to their CEOs, and their CCEOs.

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Further reading

- Sheth, J., Jain, V. and Ambika, A. (2020), “Repositioning the customer support services: the next frontier of competitive advantage”, *European Journal of Marketing*.