

A Service Strategy: Taking Customer Service From Cliche to Action

by

Barbara Wirtz

(541) 344-8213 bwirtz@wirtzconsulting.com

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“We give excellent service,” “Customer service is what we’re all about,” “You can count on us for service.” Customer service is the mantra of just about every organization—at least that’s what they say. But the reality is few organizations deliver consistent, high quality service. Why?

With so much emphasis on magnificent, death-defying feats of extraordinary customer service, we’ve lost sight of the importance of quiet consistency—of delivering on our promises through excellent people and practices. A service strategy shifts the focus from extraordinary feats of customer service to the challenge of making excellent service part of business-as-usual in our organizations.

What is a service strategy? It is a meaningful, compelling, clearly articulated definition of what service means in your organization. It creates a vision of service excellence, clarifies service standards, and builds a service culture. Without it, people are left to their own interpretation of customer service which leads to inconsistency and dissimilarity.

Why is it important? Your service strategy becomes the guide for daily behavior, decision making, and improvements. It focuses people’s efforts in a common direction, builds customer relationships, and distinguishes you from your competition. A service strategy is useful in establishing goals, hiring the right people, assessing performance, and rewarding excellence. It becomes an integral part of your organization’s infrastructure.

What criteria must it meet? Your service strategy must offer customers genuine value, must foster personal and organizational achievement, and must be aligned with your operating practices and beliefs. It must be clear, brief, memorable, and engaging. If it is too long and lofty, it becomes one of those put-in-the-drawer-to-collect-dust mission statements that no one can remember. Your service strategy should be so clear and compelling that any employee at any time can tell anyone who asks what it is.

How do you develop one? A service strategy can be developed in two ways: by your organizational leaders or jointly by your organizational leaders and employees. Forming a task force with leaders and employees working together can result in a meaningful, practical, motivating service strategy. One thing is certain though: an effective service strategy cannot be developed without the active involvement of your organization’s leaders. Don’t even attempt it without their time, effort, and support. The blood, sweat, and tears involved in the process is what creates something everyone believes in.

Is it easy to develop & implement? No! The only thing harder than developing your service strategy is living it. The process requires hard work, commitment, and perseverance and often entails long hours, frustration, and negotiation. Once it is developed, the real work begins-- implementing it. Often existing policies, procedures, and practices hinder or prevent excellent customer service. Employees are your best source of solutions to such problems. They interact with customers and usually are in the best position to identify improvements. Leaders and employees must put their heads together and figure out ways to keep the service strategy alive, well, and thriving.

How do we make it visible? Your service strategy must be symbolized. Usually during the development process an acronym, symbol, or mascot emerges; what emerges is related to your people, your product or service, and your industry and gives your strategy a uniqueness that can't be copied. Symbols help people remember and internalize the service strategy and turn something intangible into something tangible. Symbols also encourage a common language by which people can address service issues. Accepted language and meaningful symbols have great power in influencing people's thinking and behavior so use them to foster buy-in of your service strategy.

Although the service strategy process is difficult and time-consuming, the end result is unifying and inspiring. It transforms vague concepts of quality and excellence into daily behavior and constant improvement. It engages the hearts and minds of employees and can move your organization to new heights. If you don't have a service strategy, try it—you'll like it.