

Who is the Customer?

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For a business to progress well and reach its sales and profit goals, it is needless to say that it should abide by the popular rule 'customer is king'. To be able to operate truthfully under this banner, disproving those who say that 'customer is king' is a con, a clear understanding of who the customer is stands out to be the first way forward. Identifying the customer and knowing who exactly the customer is can enable a business to plan the appropriate strategies for the provision of the right service to the customer's/client's needs thereby ascertaining the laying of the foundation for meeting one's objectives.

The notion of identifying who the customer is might sound too obvious. However, there have been instances when failure to have a clear specification of the customer and to gear the business towards the fulfillment of the customer's needs has been a challenge to businesses. When it comes to service offering enterprises, particularly education offering institutions, the problem is more pronounced. Generally, this might be

attributed to the perception that one party is considered as an all king. Besides, the nature of the selling material is not like selling a commodity. That is to say, for example, in schools either the teacher, the school or the students are considered as only kings – like in privately owned educational institutions students are the only kings. Besides, providing education is not like selling soap or shoe.

Even then, since the whole notion of 'customer is king' is about providing quality goods and services, it becomes important to set in action the principles of customer handling and satisfaction in the right place. In education providing institutions, contrary to the disproportional view, which capitalizes on students, the students together with their future employers, on the one hand, are customers alongside with teachers and other staff in the institutions. The institutions should reorganize themselves based on the right understanding of who the customers are and their needs to satisfy all these customers so that they could achieve their goals and expectations. Working with this mindset might lead the institutions to better results.

As mentioned earlier, in order that students might get all the good services, the teachers should understand

and work for the fulfillment of what is needed. And for the teachers to be good service providers, the institutions should make it their concern that teachers too are their customers and, therefore, they should work towards fulfilling what is needed to make teachers a satisfied and productive taker-provider. For the institutions to be in good terms with these, responsible bodies should fulfill the needs of the institutions. The chain seems to be continuing but the interconnection is what needs a better realization and functioning. This amounts to putting first the receiver at all levels so that the provider, at all levels again, can operate at best and eventually acquire good results. As Craven Robert states, 'It seems to be upside-down thinking to put your customer's interest ahead of your own – maybe that is why so many businesses are so totally unremarkable, so unmemorable and ultimately unsuccessful.'

One of the principles in the 'customer is king' asserts that for a business to be productive, it should fight sameness and provide a different service that beats competitors and registers honest and long-lasting positive impacts or results. To teachers, whose customers are students, this translates as 'how differently do you teach and how effectively?' This involves upgrading and innovating, if

possible, one's method of teaching. If a teacher teaches in the same way all the time or if a school operates in the same what it looks like eternity, then this is an indication of the lack of awareness about the above mentioned business strategy. At this juncture, the gap can be filled in by creating awareness and also by fulfilling the requirements that the teacher /school-customer needs to be so, for instance. Jointly, there should be an effort put to fight against 'mediocrity' and stand out from the rest, according to marketing principles. Stefan Engeseth asserts that businesses should realize that feeling comfortable with 'mediocrity' is a road to downward spiral. Also, Craven confirms that "Blandness and sameness seem to have become the trademark of our time and yet it takes so little extra effort to make a product or service genuinely personalized or individualized."

Another rule is 'working the Law of the Vital Few'. This is derived from Pareto's Principle which states the 80:20 principle, where the 20 per cent of what is done is the most needed and effective. In the case of customer relationship in higher education it means that the 20 per cent of teaching methods bring the 80 per cent results for the teacher, for example. For the institutions, the 20 per cent input brings 80 per cent output. Hence, this law

dictates that businesses should know the 20 per cent effective areas and work on them to the maximum possible level. Identifying the fruitful 20 factors can allow a product or service provider to:

- a. Focus on what is beneficial
- b. Avoid what brings less effectiveness

Concentrate on "the vital few and try to cut the trivial many-focus on becoming more effective (otherwise you will become the proverbial busy fool)."

What is more, businesses have a duty to establish good, long-term relationships with customer (both internal and external) provided that their aim is long-term effectiveness. To retain a customer, a business has to care for the customer which lays the ground for a long-term relationship. It is not always the ultimate boss that gets in touch with the ultimate customers. It is also other employees who do that, hence, creating a system that cares for the employee (internal customer) also means setting an example for one employee (one customer) to take care for another customer (external customer). This culture sparks devotion and devotion carries itself to better performance and achievement. What follows here is the need for enterprises to establish customer-initiative program where the principle

of 'care for the customer' can be applied at all levels. Enterprises, therefore, need to examine their businesses and to make the necessary adjustments in line with the needs of various customers at different levels.

In regard to this, Craven also emphasizes that "Customer care (relationship marketing and customer excellence / loyalty/ intimacy) can become the central business function, which increases the firm's competitiveness. Staff may well need to change in order to adopt the new philosophy, thus, creating a sense of purpose about the organization."

Still more, in order to maximize effectiveness, businesses have to shift from being a product or service provider to problem-solver, which introduces us to yet another more vital 'customer is king' principle. This principle implies the idea that instead of looking for sales, looking for problems that the client is facing 'allows businesses to bring measurable results towards effectiveness.' In the context of educational institutions, this allows one to set the ground for improved and innovative teaching and research. In fact, it could be a trigger factor in the first place. Situations will start to be viewed through the customer's eyes, so teachers might start to see through the student's eyes, institutions through the teacher's/student's eyes etc. This in turn would lead to the awareness of the potential areas for

better involvements. According to Craven, "By running your business as if it were a problem solver, suddenly you have a significant role to play for the customer. Your role is that of who figures out what your customers are trying to do and helps them to do it."

What is more, it is needless to say that enterprises should plan and define their positions clearly and specifically with a consideration of the business environment. To survive in the competition and eventually survive in the business, a clear, specifically defined and practical business positioning statement that is free of generalizations and abstractions should be developed by organizations. Of course, this could be worked out together with top-down or down-top parties of the management. Presently in Ethiopia, at a time when the enhancement of quality is simply propagated in abstract terms, action-oriented and down-to-earth realization stands out as the most

important strategy to achieve it. Educational institutions should question, for example, whether teachers have a practical understanding of the 'quality' issue in relation to the institutions specified business-positioning. This requires not only having a business positioning but also practically executing it. They should question whether a specified and detailed statement on quality that the teacher, for example, can practically assimilate and translate into the day-to-day teaching is passed down. The same holds true with the interaction between teachers and students and between institutions and employers, etc.

In the final analysis, the notion 'customer is king' leads to a better understanding of the fundamental elements of business but, as it is mentioned at the outset of this article, knowing who exactly the customer is appears to be a burning issue. This might perhaps lead to the realization that the teacher is not the only king

as it was maintained in the traditional belief which holds the teacher is the BIG, provider of all. In educational institutions the customers are dependent on one another, which again might lead to the realization that the student may not be an all king as such. In effect, this indicates that a strong realization of the powerful interdependence of the involved parties in the education environment needs a serious reconsideration.

References

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