

Productivity era dilutes old-school ways

Increasingly, personal attention between an employee and a customer is becoming a luxury

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Cultural scientists used to say that Asians placed great importance on the quality of interpersonal relationships and interactions between employee and customer.

An old Japanese proverb hails the customer as God.

But as productivity increasingly becomes the lifeline of the modern economy, efficiency, and explicit, direct and unambiguous communications are being endorsed overwhelmingly.

Customers today prefer efficient delivery even if it is impersonal.

In Japan, drivers expect their car salesman to remind them when service is due, pick up their vehicle, return it to their home after servicing it and provide a replacement car if needed.

But this kind of exceptional service is becoming increasingly rare, or is referred to as high-end, a luxury that will cost the customer a handsome sum.

A standard service for all yields consistency and is more efficient, but it does make the service rendered somewhat robotic and impersonal.

China-based Haidilao Hot Pot restaurant remains old school. The restaurant emphasises attentiveness to the customer, with its staff even peeling off prawn shells for diners. But such restaurants are fast becoming an exception these days.

The customised and ritualised service delivery system is under grave threat.

As always, the service provider of today must be sufficiently experienced to understand what customers want and adapt accordingly.

While training helps, gaining experience by working with a multitude of personalities can be acquired only by staying long on the job – a luxury many companies do not have as workers job hop in a booming Asian economy.

Problems with offering customised service are compounded when there is customer empowerment.

INTERNET

The Internet has empowered customers by letting them publish their comments and these views reach anywhere in the world.

When mistakes are made while operating the customised service system, complaints can be rampant, and it could lead to serious repercussions.

This could well discourage service providers to customise and instead offer a standardised ser-

vice that is less subject to the vagaries of the customers.

Increasingly, customers also want to have a say in how the service is carried out. This can be stressful on service providers, especially when they differ with the customer on how the service is to be rendered.

Sometimes, a service failure occurs because of customer involvement. Unfortunately, human nature is such that customers will feel the service provider is at fault.

Based on the need for productivity, and to ease managing customers, services are increasingly moving into self-service technologies.

More restaurants have customers ordering food using the notepad. Self check-in booths are increasingly a feature at new airports.

Robots are being used to deliver files, medicine and

parcels, and concert and movie tickets can be booked online.

While old-school customers may prefer the ever smiling, ever helpful ticket officer at the booth, or the engaging and problem-solving customer service officer at a bank, or the cashier when checking out at the supermarkets, the customised and ritualistic nature of many services is under serious threat today.

It has become abundantly clear that productivity, technology and the cost of competition dictate the way to go in the modern economy.

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