



E-Learning for Customer Service: Achieving Participant Buy-in

by Stephanie Edwards of Customer 1st International

“New recruits joining organisations in the next few years will have e-learning expectations when undertaking various forms of training or updating - so organisations must respond now to meet this demand in the future.

Customer Expectations Becoming Customer Demands

Customer satisfaction in the UK is running at 69% - that is 3% higher than in 2007 - but the UK Customer Satisfaction Index 2008 shows that many customers' needs are still not being met. We may mull over customer satisfaction indices, listen to tales of horrendous service, or just rely on our own experiences of the wide-ranging levels of service that exist. But whichever way we look at it, things just don't seem to get significantly better for customers. And that is in spite of the rising mountain of evidence showing that the customer experience is the prime determinant of business success, and that customers' expectations are not only increasing, but that those expectations are actually turning into demands.

Customer Service Training as the Solution

Training is often the solution, but, you may ask, don't we already know how to deliver customer service? Isn't it just that many employees are not sufficiently motivated to do the things for customers that will delight and excite them? Customer Service training does contribute to the solution, but the complete answer is often more about behaviour and attitude. The question becomes: what form of training will really make the difference in motivating my

employees to behave in the right way? Very often they know what to do - but they need to become enthused and excited about customers. A spark is required in order to turn that organisational customer service strategy, that vision of service excellence, into a reality.

About the Author

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Yes, customer service training is needed, indeed essential, but it has to impact the final service that the customer receives – the customer experience. You need to go beyond the normal, and find a way of transforming the behaviour and attitude of your employees, so that they truly are customer-focused.

E-Learning as a More Effective and Far-Reaching Solution

Improvements in the levels of service received and perceived by customers demand a more flexible and far-reaching means of transforming attitudes and behaviours of employees. The relatively narrow confines of the customer care course in the company training room are sometimes too limiting on their own. Companies need to find ways of linking their employees



together - right across the organisation if possible – with access to a wide range of knowledge sources, subject matter experts, examples of best practice and other peoples' experience of customer service. Look for a more effective and thought-provoking method of engaging employees in the means of achieving service excellence.

So what about e-learning? Could the answer to achieving this additional and more far-reaching impact lie in online learning solutions? The flexibility and convenience of online courses can work wonders for organisations – especially those that are trans-national or even global. The ability to bring together geographically scattered employees turns e-learning from a cost-saver (probably the accepted view from the past) to an enabler. It can be the only realistic way of delivering training and of spreading a consistent customer service message across large organisations. And, done in the right way, it is capable of motivating and inspiring employees to turn around their level of service quality.

Where e-learning is the solution to customer service issues, it needs to be implemented in the right way. The CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) report in their 2008 survey on learning and development that over half of learning and development managers (57%) now offer e-learning as part of their training provision. Of those who are not using e-learning, more than one quarter (27%) plan to do so over the next year. This proves beyond doubt that e-learning has arrived and is firmly established as a key part of corporate training.

However, even after a decade, there are doubts about the effectiveness of e-learning, according to the CIPD survey. When asked to list the top three most effective training practices, only 7% of respondents mentioned e-learning. Only 30% of participants are reported as completing courses. A series of answers in the survey indicated that, in organisations using e-learning, it is likely to be offered to about 60% of the employees, but taken up by only 30%. When asked the direct question "How effective do you think e-learning is as a learning and development intervention?", only 8% stated "very effective" with the majority (64%) saying that it was "fairly effective".

And yet, for Customer Service, e-learning, especially blended e-learning (which supplements the core, online content with a range of other learning resources/methods, such as face-to-face, peer collaboration, online tutor support and informal learning) does offer tremendous potential if it is implemented in the right way.

One might ask: "Can you learn about customer service online? Isn't customer service mainly about soft skills, best developed on the job? What about the practical, communication-based competencies?" Yes, you can develop those sorts of skills and competencies in the training room, in the office, and in the contact centre, but a key advantage of online courses is that they give employees the golden opportunity to talk to each other - in a structured way - about the knowledge, skills and competencies that make the difference for customers. Participants often relate online discussions to what they are actually doing in their customer service role.



In short, participants can take more control of their learning.

What Makes E-Learning Successful?

The key to effective e-learning is focusing on the participant, not the technology. Martyn Sloman, CIPD learning and development adviser, says that: “Simply saying we support blended learning solutions is not enough. We must work much harder to integrate e-learning into broader learning and performance support activities. The best organisations are doing this, but the worst are simply making e-learning available to the individual on their PC and hoping that something will happen as a result. E-learning is about learning not technology.”

So in order to learn effectively, what does a participant actually need? The graphic “Components of Effective E-Learning” shows the typical requirements that need to be present if the learning is to be successful for the participant (and hence the organisation). You may find it useful, when designing or commissioning customer service learning programmes, to match the contents of each column – Suitability, Access, Collaboration, Learning, Progression and Achievement – to your own e-learning requirements.

Components of Effective E-Learning

SUITABILITY	ACCESS	COLLABORATION	LEARNING	PROGRESSION	ACHIEVEMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language appropriate for participants • Flexible access times & locations • Compatibility with participants’ technology • Compatibility with participants’ software • Fits with Learning Management System (LMS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gateway accessible & minimal barriers to entry • Friendly welcome • Clear information, signposts & navigational help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socialisation opportunities • Online community • Building knowledge & best practice through collaboration • Developing learning to higher levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well designed activities & learning tools • Applying learning at work • Copes with different learning styles • Signposts or gives access to useful resources • Linking from learning to job-based improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive online tutoring & support • Sparking interest and inspiration • Motivation through overcoming challenges • Participant-focused structure – bite-sized chunks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising success • Certification and/or accreditation • Progress to further learning • Links to job-based performance improvement
SUITABILITY	ACCESS	COLLABORATION	LEARNING	PROGRESSION	ACHIEVEMENT



Some online courses have relied too much on the content and technology, but paid too little attention to the participant and the learning process itself. If the content is good, it will be useful to participants, and capable of improving their job performance.

However, unless the learning methods and all the other elements that surround the content are appropriate and motivating for the participant, the real learning taking place can be limited. Not surprisingly, large employers are more likely to use e-learning: organisations with more than 5000 employees have an uptake of 79%, whereas those with less than 250 have a 39% uptake.

More and more organisations are creating or commissioning their own online learning programmes. The 2008 CIPD Report on e-learning shows that 57% of corporate training and development solutions now include e-learning. Some are successful, but many in the past have disappointed both participants and the sponsoring organisation. Why is this? Discerning managers and educators are re-learning an age-old lesson: learning is not just about absorbing factual information - it is much more about participants creating, sharing, developing and applying knowledge to real-work situations.

How to Achieve Participant Buy-In

One critical ingredient of any form of successful learning is participant buy-in. In the training room it tends to originate from learning alongside others, and being led by a charismatic trainer. How often have we said "What I really enjoyed was talking to people from other parts of the company"? With online learning the buy-in results from socialisation with other participants and the online tutor.

E-learning need to generate and maintain an online community amongst its participants. The course is not simply a set of individuals, beaver away at their own time and in their own place. An online community brings the participants together with a clear (but often not fully pre-determined) sense of purpose. It can take on its own momentum, and participants in the community are motivated to continue to go online, synthesise discussion points, post their own and engage in genuine learning.

The key point here is that socialisation is now made much more possible, convenient and enjoyable by the technology. Blogs, forums, social networks, and the other, fast-expanding opportunities presented by the internet make it far easier to incorporate socialisation into a learning programme. Many organisations already use blogs, wikis and forums, for example, to enable employees and customers to collaborate on projects. Not only can that add to opportunities for customer service improvement, the participants will also improve their ability to work with others, to communicate and collaborate – developing those critical business skills further.



Components of Online Community

- The skills of the Online Tutor – this includes both subject matter expertise in customer service and competence in supporting, monitoring and motivating participants.
- The participants themselves, who may be from different cultures and backgrounds, with different preferred learning styles and also varying educational ability and IT skills.
- The key factors which will motivate participants – in the case of customer service these need to be closely linked to the organisation's own approach to customer service – such as its customer service strategy or framework, and preferably the organisation's own, distinctive service culture.
- The technology itself – computers, internet connection speeds, the software being used and the provision of technical support.
- The specific Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS), and how well it encourages Online Community.
- The course content and design, including, critically, the design of high-impact online activities.
- How Online Community is built and consolidated through each of the learning activities.
- An online tutoring strategy – how the Online Tutor will engage with participants. For example, a strategy in which the Online Tutor leads the activities and provides providing encouraging feedback to participants, helping the group to draw out the learning points, will often be more successful than one where the Online Tutor takes a more passive role.

Review the “Components of Online Community”, and ensure that there is a high degree of socialisation and collaboration, generating the ongoing motivational spark in your online medium.

Effective Online Tutoring

In face-to-face training courses, the role of the trainer is absolutely key; likewise in e-learning the Online Tutor really is an essential element. Your employees will only really succeed in numbers if there is a skilled, committed and motivational Online Tutor playing a leading role in the online course. The Online Tutor largely operates through the e-learning activities themselves – these activities, with the Tutor's contribution – can provide the motivational spark that is the basis of successful online collaboration.

Successful E-learning Activities

Pay close attention to the e-learning design. The online course content and structures – including its resources, discussion topics and collaborative tools - should blend together in a way which encourages interest, discussion and learning.

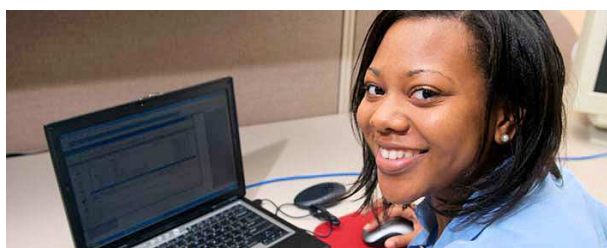




Well Designed E-Learning Activities

E-Learning activities should be:

- Motivating, engaging, relevant and purposeful.
- Based on some interaction between participants (and the Online Tutor) – in many cases through the medium of written message contributions, but increasingly through audio- and video-enabled tools.
- Designed and led by the Online Tutor.
- Asynchronous (i.e., they take place over time, allowing participants the flexibility of learning at times which suit their job and lifestyle) – but nevertheless involve the whole learning group focusing on the same set of topics during the same time period.
- Easy to run - usually through text-based web tools like forums, wikis, blogs and assignments.
- Summarised, with feedback or critique from the Online Tutor, or sometimes the participants themselves – this key stage draws out the learning points from the activity.



Maintaining Progress

E-learning can suffer from the same problem as conventional distance learning courses - that of high drop-out rates. But why do participants drop out? Employees have many competing demands on their time, both at work and at home. See it from a participant's point of view. Design your e-learning around the factors that will maintain the progress of your participants. As a general rule, the activities that will remain on an individual's agenda over any length period of time have to include one or more of the following characteristics:

- Essential – if my training programme is a compulsory part of my development activities at work, then I will certainly remain engaged. However, there should be other reasons that really motivate me to become wholeheartedly involved.
- Enjoyable – it is a positive experience which I look forward to, and in those moments when I am deciding which of a range of competing demands to engage in, I'll often choose the learning, because I know I'm going to enjoy it and find it rewarding.
- Structured – if there is a clear, predetermined structure to my learning programme, such as completion dates and times, or I can access the learning at certain times of the week, then my mind is predisposed to expect the learning to take place. Any doubts I might have are lessened by my assumption that I will do the learning.
- Social – people are social beings, and we all enjoy activities where we relate to other people. If we can actually make friends through our learning, then we will



be motivated to keep returning to the discussion forum or to see the latest news about the ideas and activities of our new-found online buddies.

- Supportive – we need support from the friends we make online, together with our Online Tutor and even the technology and resources that are made available. If they support me in my learning endeavours they will help me to be successful, take my learning forward and build my confidence and desire for more learning.

Taking Learning to the Next Level

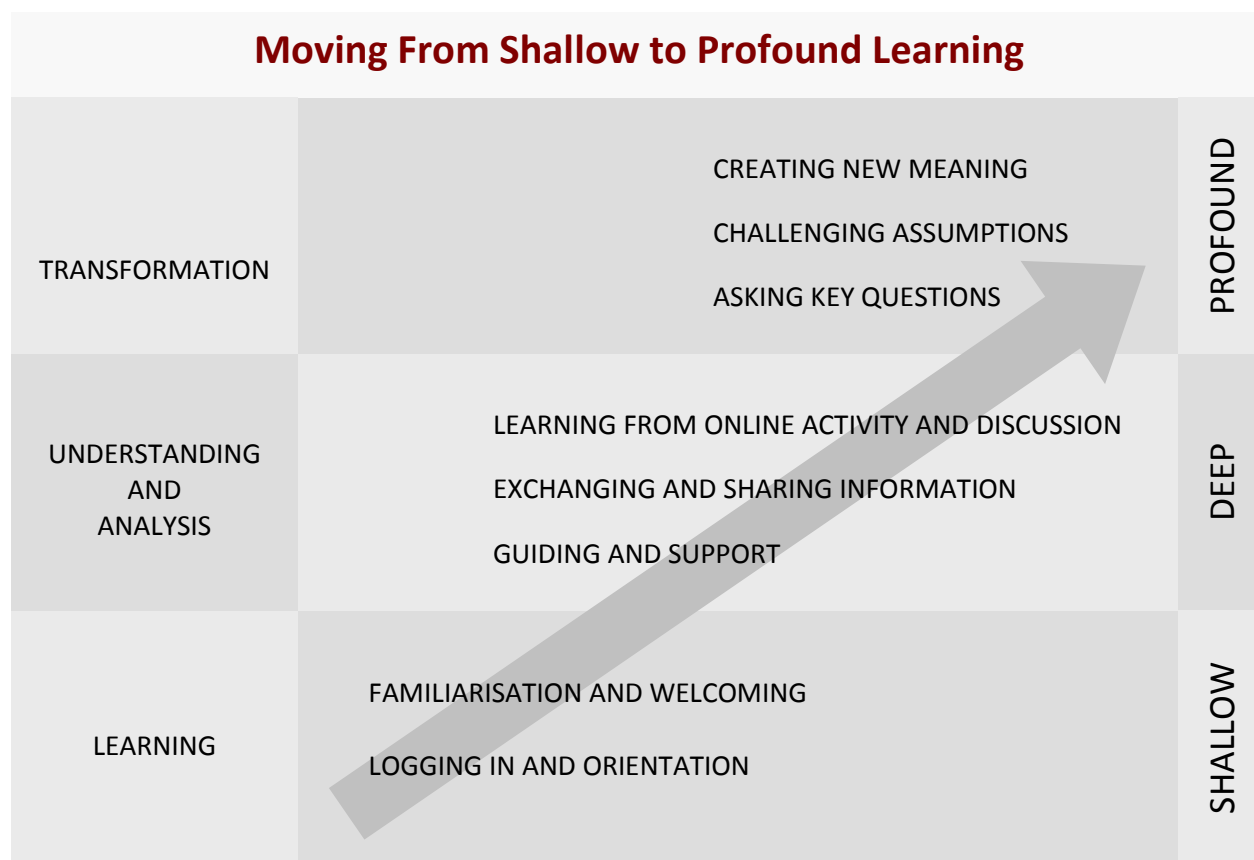
The final critical element in the successful e-learning programme is the development of learning itself. Training and learning is not, for participants, simply a matter of taking on a body of knowledge. Yes, there will be important knowledge requirements that you wish to get across in the programme – such as how employees should deliver their service to customers, how to handle problems, and so on. But participants need to develop their own knowledge and understanding to higher levels.

The graphic “Moving from Shallow to Profound Learning” displays three stages of learning that typically exist for participants as they progress through an e-learning course. At the lowest level they are engaging in

“shallow” learning, becoming familiar with the use of the system, and introducing themselves to the Online Tutor and other participants. They begin to learn – taking on new knowledge and concepts.

Next, at a “deep” level, they progress in their learning, beginning to understand how to apply facts and concepts in order to analyse situations. For example, they may use or even generate a behavioural model for dealing with a difficult customer or colleague in a customer service situation. Much of the learning at this deeper level comes through the sharing of information and ideas with others – online collaboration.

At the highest, “profound” level of learning key questions are asked – by participants and tutors. The learning, knowledge, concepts and ideas are now applied to totally new contexts, and participants at this level will challenge previously accepted ideas and assumptions, creating new meaning and collaborating, for example, to discover innovations in their customer service delivery for their organisations. Moving through the stages from shallow to profound learning maintains momentum for participants, and enables the organisation to gain real and measurable benefits from the learning programme.



Adapted from Gilly Salmon (2004)

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