

Best Practice Guide for Customer Service Managers

Trevor Arden & Stephanie Edwards, 2009, Customer 1st International

Review by Dr Ted Johns, Chairman of the Institute of Customer Service

"When Customer 1st International published their inaugural book, a Best Practice Guide for Customer Service Professionals, I thought they would be hard pressed to repeat the exercise. It's often said that most people have a first novel in them - all they have to do is fictionalise their lives - but the real challenge is to supply a follow-up, and it's at this hurdle that many authors fall down.

There's no such disappointment here. Trevor and Stephanie have produced a publication that could stand alone as a first-class textbook on customer service and world-class customer-centric excellence. The book's strengths are many:

- Comprehensive coverage of everything that professional managers need to know and do in order to be taken seriously by their customers, both internal and external.
- For those who consider it important, a content which is authoritatively mapped against the National Occupational Standards.
- A focus on not just 'getting things right' (service efficiency) but also, and principally, on 'doing the right things' (service effectiveness). This means that each chapter is accompanied by a set of learning outcomes and also that each chapter is concerned with performance deliverables. There is no suggestion that simply being 'nice' is enough; on the contrary, the authors rightly emphasise here and there that the competent manager must occasionally be an apostle of 'tough love' in order to get things done.
- Throughout there is an emphasis on the requirement for a continuous improvement and transformational change mentality on the part of the customer service manager (and not just among customer service managers, in my opinion). So long as customer aspirations keep growing, then companies cannot remain complacent and self-satisfied about their service performance - which means that dealing with customers must remain one of the most exciting parts of any business if only because it never stands still.
- A philosophical clarity which personally I find refreshing in a world which is normally characterised by wishful thinking, spin and conceptual evasion. For example, on page 13 Trevor and Stephanie make it clear that "what counts is the Customer Experience -

the service that the customer perceives, rather than the service the organisation thinks it has delivered.” Yet there are still many businesses which try to measure their service performance and progress by reference to internal measures like telephone call response times and call duration, instead of asking themselves far more fundamental questions about whether any given customer-facing transaction has generated results which are positively meaningful for both parties involved.

- The whole book is pragmatic, feet-on-the-ground stuff, using accessible language and illustrating its key principles with ‘best practice’ examples from three carefully-chosen exemplar businesses: Euro-Deporte, a European leisure company, Unicentro, a retail operation, and GCU Finance.
- Though not overburdened with ‘theory’, its material is carefully grounded in solid research findings, particularly those presented by Professor Robert Johnston in his studies of world-class service excellence conducted on behalf of the Institute of Customer Service. In fact, one of the most impressive features of this Best Practice Guide for Customer Service Managers is the fact that it follows its own continuous-improvement advice, and therefore builds on what has gone before rather than merely reproducing it. Thus the ‘Components of Excellent Customer Service’ (page 22) don’t simply copy Professor Johnston’s framework but add a further (“Keep it Simple”) element.
- Where appropriate, the authors are cautious about making claims which cannot be justified by evidence. Though they quite rightly draw attention to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, for example (page 134), they also point out that “not everyone is driven by the same things”.

I would recommend this book wholeheartedly as a thoroughly competent, professionally produced and enormously valuable self-learning, self-development and self-enriching text.”

Dr Ted Johns (Former ICS Chair), 2009