

CRM WITH NO SURPRISES

Rob Brickle and John Bowler stress the importance of having a strategic plan in place for managing customer relationships.



Rob Brickle: treat customers as a key stakeholder group

To not have a plan is to always be surprised, unable to respond to change and progress against a background of uncertainty. Of an organisation's stakeholders, customers are the ones that least like surprises – they like to feel important and want reassurance that their needs are being met.

If a business or organisation does not have effective customer management it will often find itself in a weakened position compared to its competitors and unable to respond effectively to many of the demands placed upon it.

For many businesses, customer management is implicit in the business plan but not necessarily directly linked to achievement of financial or growth targets. Often, though, the success of an organisation in achieving its strategic plan is critically dependent on good customer relationships to maintain position and competitiveness.

It makes sense therefore, for an organisation's strategic plan to not only recognise the different needs of the various stakeholders, but also to address the means of achieving the plan in a way that links customers to the organisation's success. By adopting a well thought-out and integrated approach to its customer relationships, an organisation has a framework for good decision making, managing performance and giving the customer a key role within its strategic plan.

If there is no plan for customer management or it is ineffective, organisations often resort to the first of the 'I' words when dealing with their customers: improvisation. When things start to go wrong customers can receive mixed messages through different channels, communication can break down completely, compromised performance can lead to delivery delays, and change and uncertainty in the organisation leads to nervousness and loss of confidence by the customer.

An organisation that does not fully integrate customer management within its strategy is also at a disadvantage. It may have to use extraordinary measures to maintain position and the confidence of customers when things change or go out of control. It will need to use the second 'I' word, innovation, to go forward. Customers may be aware of a change of approach, become involved in problem solving, and see frantic activity and change in response to changing circumstances.

With a strategic plan that treats the customers as a key stakeholder group and robust customer-facing processes, an organisation is well placed to achieve and sustain success. It becomes easy to work in partnership with customers and take advantage of the third of the 'I' words: imagination. Customers will feel well informed, consulted, involved and support the business, willing to make compromises as necessary and to help the organisation achieve its goals, as the organisation's and customers' futures are linked together.

Good planning and management of customer relationships is the only way for an organisation and its customers to be confident in each other and not to be taken by surprise.

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