

CRM WITHOUT SURPRISES

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



Rob Brickle: customers can receive mixed messages through different channels

To lack a plan is to always be surprised, unable to respond to change against a background of uncertainty. And among an organisation's stakeholders, customers are the ones who least like surprises – they want to feel important and seek 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 against its competitors, 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 the achievement of financial or growth targets. Often, though, the success of an organisation in achieving its strategic plan critically depends on good customer relationships to maintain its 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 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 will have a framework for good decision making, managing performance and giving the customer a key role within its strategic plan.

However, if there is no plan for customer management or the plan 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 its 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 then 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 its future and that of its customers are linked together.

In summary, 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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