

## CUSTOMER INTIMACY – WHY BOTHER?

*Rob Brickle defends a basic tenet of CRM.*



**Rob Brickle: stand in the shoes of your customer**

Let's be a little provocative... Why would you want to be intimate with your customers? If your view is there is no benefit in this, then save yourself some time and don't bother reading any more of this article. Good luck with your business and, unless you have a complete monopoly in your particular market, I hope you manage to make a lot of money and retire before it hits terminal decline!!

For the more enlightened of my readers (assuming I still have any!) read on.

At SAP's recent UK user conference, managing director Steve Rogers touched on customer intimacy in his keynote address. He spoke of his desire to open up a company that is perceived to be closed and resistant to change.

Very brave and bold statements to make about your own organisation in such a competitive environment. Specifically he said: "When I joined I was surprised at how remote SAP felt from its customers. It didn't have the customer at the centre of its universe. What had happened was that there was a little complacency in the way it managed its relationships with its customers."

He went on to say how important it was for the customer to see more of SAP, and for SAP to be seen to manage the relationship in a proactive way.

Personally I take my hat off to Steve Rogers. First because he was prepared to stand up and say this publicly and second because he is clearly enlightened and recognises the need for customer intimacy.

It never ceases to amaze me how organisations believe they can have a remote and transactional relationship with their customers. Fine, that may work for you and me as individuals in a business-to-consumer situation, but when we are talking about big-ticket business-to-business relationships, it is highly inappropriate.

At Bsquared we constantly deal with large organisations and how they effectively manage their customer relationships. These organisations recognise the lifetime value of their customers and acknowledge that in order to grow, and for the relationships they have with their customers to be successful, they have to:

- Understand the requirements of the customer, not as a product vendor but from a customer perspective as if they had stood in the shoes of that customer.
- Add value, and be able to demonstrate this to their customers. But it is the value the customer recognises, sometimes downstream, that is the real benefit.
- Be competitive. In an increasingly competitive environment the relationship you have with your customer may be the only differentiator.
- Be prepared to change and adapt in order to maximise the return both parties get out of the relationship.

This last point to me is particularly important. W Edwards Deming, management guru and recognised as being largely responsible for bringing the Japanese manufacturing capability back on track post World War II, said: "It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory."

To recognise what needs to change you need to look outside, not inside. You cannot do this in isolation from your customers.

It is not about market research or customer satisfaction. You have to have an intimate relationship with your customers, that

enables you to understand where they are heading and an appropriate mechanism for capturing and managing that information corporately.

This is what will then help you drive appropriate change in the business that will enhance the relationship, inspire confidence and improve the bottom line.

Well done Steve, and I wish you much success in driving the change that you want in your organisation.

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