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Service in the digital age

CONTENTS

Service establishes value. For clients, employees und companies.

CONTENTS.....2
Excellent service – a matter of heart with strong effect.3
Service is not a project. Service is an attitude.....5
Service culture is power. Because attitude is not copiable.6
Learn more about Sabine Hübner.....7
Contact.....7



Excellent service – a matter of heart with strong effect.

Service should be called a flamboyant term or maybe rather an overused term: from self-service and maintenance service, luxury service, service waiting point right up to neologisms like “faeces service”, we find the most diverse interpretations.

So what does service mean? And what is so special about it? Service can be compared to performing arts: It is not material, repeatedly unique, emerges closely connected to the client, is individually perceived in completely different ways and lives via communication. A mistake cannot just be “repaired” and undone. This is why an employee, who addresses the client with his wrong name, causes a negative connotation. If it takes weeks to repair a suitcase of high quality and nobody addresses this circumstance openly, even the most beautiful suitcase makes us lose our joy. Without sincerity at the reception, even a magnificent show room is of little value. A bad service film cannot simply be rewound and replayed with a different script. Ideally, outstanding service is perfect in its first attempt. This particular fact is what always made service a special challenge.

Nowadays, further challenges need to be considered. We live in a world where products resemble each other more and more and where the digital world finds its way into the material world. The boundary between product and service dissolves. The client of today is as autonomous, informed, critical and selective as he has never been before. Every contact point of a company with a client is a test. If the service is not adequate, the client leaves or communicates his displeasure publicly. Both of these possibilities hurt, cost money and maybe even the good reputation. Only recently, I received a personal email of my IT provider with an offer for the extension of my virus protection. I quickly accepted the offer and added to my answer that there was another problem with my computer I was urgently searching help for. No reaction at all. The answer simply did not fit

into the scheme and requests beyond the scheme obviously did not work. Individual service has become one of the most important instruments of differentiation. It establishes the connection between product and client and makes the real difference. Why is this the case?

There is no separation between the inner and outer sphere of service anymore. Entrepreneurs, who want to convince their clients with the help of service, first of all need to win their own employees. “My client is sitting next door” – this sentence should be recalled by entrepreneurs and employees every day. Only a satisfied employee can generate customer satisfaction. Only an employee, who feels connected to his own company, can establish customer loyalty. And only an employee, who experiences this kind of culture in his own company every day, can live service culture sincerely. This is quite logical: If even colleagues do not manage to interact carefully but instead communicate unclearly and do not meet commitments, it is impossible to live excellent service with regards to the client. The communication with employees has to be direct, honest, clear and emotional, but processes and structures need to be completely rationally controlled in contrast to this. This exact interplay is what matters. If it succeeds, employees can turn into passionate fans. And these passionate fans are what companies need for excellent service of the future.

Practicing marketing with a watering can does not function anymore. People have a strong need to be perceived. They have a wish to feel seen, heard and understood. The client of the future wants to communicate with a company on equal terms and he insists on companies that listen to him. He is not interested in what the marketing departments suggest and he does not want to be put off by outsourced service departments. What he wants is that the companies provide him with what he really wishes for – or even better: What he would wish for if only he knew about it. This only works with empathic employees – professionals with heart and mind. Empathy has an incredible effect in connection with friendliness. Empathy establishes magic moments and is the best way to build on customer trust. Along with friendliness, we express commitment and goodwill. We reach the people and open up the possibility to influence even the most difficult situation in a positive way. Only with empathy we are able to understand the viewpoint of others. We are able to act courteously and can provide the exact solution along with the right communication. For a maximum of encounter quality in this very moment and enthusiastic clients.

To achieve this goal, employees need freedom instead of a straitjacket, which takes away the air to breathe. “Acting is reacting” – this wisdom originates from the world of theatre. The same applies to service. In order to achieve excellent service, there must not be a fixed script, which employees need to internalise. Things like that suppress sincerity caused by the weight of false formality. Instead, successful service is always supported by empathy. People oftentimes ask me: “Can empathy be learned?” My experience from many projects is clear: “YES! Empathy can be learned.” And this is also the opinion of science. Even if there are people who inherit empathy and others that need to develop empathy over time.

From an objective point of view, empathic actions develop within four phases:

1. Concentration – only a matter of organisation; 2. Perception – arises from experience and is a question of training; 3. Creativity – blossoms from the spirit of a company and 4. Courage for implementation – this is developed together with senses of achievement, a good reputation with the clients or attention of the manager.

Even the employees of flagship companies were not born with a “gene for customer enthusiasm“. Behind this kind of spirit, we always find attention to detail, persistence and system. Service champions talk about the relevant topics with their employees at least once a week in a motivating way. As natural as toothbrushing. This consistency in connection with the aim of betterment changes the inner attitude. Only under these conditions, employees search for ways to fascinate their clients. Only under these conditions, employees always find the

right tone and intensity of addressing the clients. Because it is never only about the “What“, it is also always about the “How“.

Service is not a project. Service is an attitude.

The future of communication is service. The future of service is communication. We cannot avoid talking to our clients in a more intensive, better and more intelligent way, if we want to be successful tomorrow, or even better: more successful. The “we” addresses every single person in a company: from management to employees in every department. During the age of interconnection, everyone is in the focus of the client. Generally speaking, it is not about the last finesse of the classical rhetoric but rather about very simple and fundamental aspects:

- being quite clear,
- touching all the senses,
- letting emotions resonate,
- communicating honestly and appreciatively.

The very simple task once again turns out to be a real challenge. We are facing a paradigm shift: **Service communication of the future will not be made *for* the client, it will develop in collaboration *with* the client.**

This process will only work under the following conditions: We have to be completely willing to communicate on equal terms with the client. We should not overrate the client as a king. Instead, we should appreciate him as a partner. This is the only way we can perceive his competence and take advantage of it. And this is the only way we can benefit from what is regarded the secret of the most successful organisations: A productive combination of value creation and esteem. Successful service communication is a question of different values. It is a question of the inner attitude. It is a relevant topic that can neither be completed within a half-day seminar concerning the topic of communication nor a short service training.

What really matters is a long-term organisational development. New patterns of thinking and behaviour do not develop at the touch of a bottom. They call for persistence, patience, practice but primarily for convincing managers. Managers, who do not need to urge their employees to work hard for a better service or more communication. Instead, these managers should pull along their employees with the help of a strong inner attitude. The Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl once put this straight:

**“While I am driven by impulses,
I am pulled by values.”**

Viktor E. Frankl

In the future, companies that manage to value their clients as individual value creators instead of anonymous consumers, will be the most successful. These companies will be extremely successful with clients that can and want to contribute to the own value culture.

The winners of the future will be those, who

- value their client as a partner,
- establish value in cooperation with the client,
- care for a friendly and honest customer contact without being annoying,
- make services transparent,
- keep service promises consequently,
- use IT systems not only for the own advantage but also for the advantage of the client,
- and those, who are good to the own employees and talk about this.

As I mentioned before: This might sound easy. But do you know a single company that manages to implement all of these factors consequently? Neither do I. But what I do know is that many companies already took a big step in the right direction.

Service culture is power. Because attitude is not copiable.

Attitude means showing inner strength against resistance instead of hiding behind a wall of comfort and stinginess, bureaucracy and prejudices. Attitude means approaching other people openly and without any resentments. Attitude means listening. Attitude means understanding, helping, supporting, being friendly. Attitude means accepting resonance. It means living together, laughing, loving. This is why service is not a project, service is an attitude. Service is an attitude that captivates everything and everyone in a company. It cannot be decreed or delegated. Every single person needs to strive for attitude, over and over again.

There is no way around the task of fighting for a dynamic tension everyday. Composure. The willingness to take the right way voluntarily instead of taking the line of the least resistance – along with one's weaker self as a loyal companion. The Austrian psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl once said very appropriately **“One does not have to put up with everything of oneself“**. One can also do it differently. Every single person can do it differently. Every single person can develop an attitude which allows support, gives the person a face and enables precious encounters with others.

It is true, attitude gives us work to do. And attitude brings happiness to all of us – clients, employees, entrepreneurs, really all of us.

Let us talk about attitude now. Because it is never too late for happiness.

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Learn more about Sabine Hübner

Whenever the management floors of big groups and medium-sized companies talk about service optimisation, her name is at the top of every list of specialists and consultants. Sabine Hübner is passionate for the topic of service. That is what others see, hear and feel. Those who get to know her, directly understand: This woman loves what she does. She loves it so much, that it does not even feel like doing hard work. Her industrial diversity is unique. National as well as international companies trust in her solution strategies. She connects her large wealth of experience as a practical employer with her expertise in the areas of consulting and strategy formation. She encourages companies to perceive service as being part of the business culture in order to redefine it. Service is valued as a strong economic factor, which makes a real difference in the competition with other companies.

Sabine Hübner is a successful employer, speaker, progressive thinker and practitioner through and through. She is managing partner of the management consultancy RichtigRichtig.com. Sabine Hübner won the “Conga-Award” several times and was rewarded as the “Speaker of the Year” in 2012. Her books sustainably shape the service understanding of many people. She is the **“Service expert no. 1” (Pro7)**.

Her credo: Service is not a project. Service is an attitude.

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