



The **HUMAN** MOMENT

Make **SERVICE** *Your* **COMPANY'S DNA**

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ince the 1990s, service has become more professional, more efficient, more digital. Luckily for companies and customers alike. But humanity, empathy and humour were left behind – and are only now making a comeback. Hopefully.

From punched-tape telex machines to ChatGPT – looking back, my professional life reads like a long chain of deep disruptions. We never really knew in advance what each of them would mean for our business. And every single time we learned that, in the end, it was not about technology – but about something else. Do you remember phonecards? Those little plastic cards you needed for public payphones? Until the late 1990s, roughly 500 million phonecards were sold in Germany. Back then, I was managing partner of a print shop – around 90 per cent of all German phonecards came off our presses. A solid business. Or so we thought.

SERVICE IS NOT A PROJECT.

SERVICE IS AN ATTITUDE.

Then mobile phones arrived. When I left the company, I took one vital lesson with me: in disruptive moments, the key question is not “what” the technology. It is “how” the service attitude. How will the world keep turning, how will our customers’ needs, habits and desires change – and keep changing, how can we keep reinventing service from the ground up to stay successful, and, above all, how do we build this service attitude into a company’s very DNA so it can keep reinventing itself? “Service is not a project. Service is an attitude.” That line became the credo of my professional life. It still holds true today. And today we can see that the champions of almost every industry are those companies that have written a deep understanding of their customers into their very DNA. Service has changed fundamentally as a result – and keeps changing.

WHAT HAS IMPROVED:

TRANSPARENCY AND SPEED

Over recent decades, we have optimised, perfected, measured and streamlined service. It has become more automated, more digital, more tightly managed. Every detail has its own KPI: response times, availability, first call resolution, net promoter score... Everything can be steered, everything is rated.

This has pushed service forward for customers, no doubt. I am truly grateful I no longer have to be at the airport three hours before departure to queue at the counter with a paper ticket and 158 other passengers just to check in.

The new transparency is wonderful. Today we know in how many minutes our taxi or our salad will arrive, and how long the call centre will keep us waiting. These are real advances for companies: transparency and speed are among the strongest drivers of modern customer satisfaction – and therefore among the strongest drivers of revenue

WELCOME TO THE “EMPATHY GAP”

Service quality is increasingly defined by speed, reliability and availability. Good. But if service is mainly about functioning smoothly, then my bot might as well call your bot. Nothing truly happens in between. Yet wasn’t it lovely to joke with the service adviser at the car dealership? With the heating engineer? With your hairdresser? I adore those little surprises in a human encounter. The genuine interest in the other person. The human moment.

Now everything is supposed to be fast, clean and digital. If it works, fine – I like saving time too. But often it does not work, or it has not been thought through to the end. “Beep! This offer is no longer available!” Researchers already talk about the “empathy gap” – a growing distance between what customers expect and what companies actually make them feel. →

” SERVICE USED TO BE A RELATIONSHIP. THEN IT BECAME A PROCESS. NOW IT IS MOVING TO THE CORE OF THE ORGANISATION.



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NO CHATBOT ON EARTH
CAN REPLACE A GENUINE,
HUMAN 'I'LL SORT THIS
OUT FOR YOU.'

” CUSTOMERS SHOW UP WITH
REAL ISSUES, NOT
AS WALKING ACCOUNT
NUMBERS OR CASH COWS.

**WHAT WE COULD DO WITHOUT: THE SERVICE
INTERFACE AS DEFENCE SYSTEM.**

“Press 1 for billing, 2 for returns, 3 for...” We all know those moments when you start out with one simple question and end up wandering through a service maze, trying to find a real human being with a helpful answer. When you finally reach someone, it feels like the old days again – a matter of luck. Maybe this person can help, maybe not. Sadly, often not.

Service systems were built to help – and they do help when they are well designed, which means: designed for the customer. Too often, though, they feel as if they were designed mainly for the company: they keep customers at arm’s length instead of welcoming them in. The idea behind them is called efficiency, yet studies show that many people abandon service interactions when they feel they are fighting their way through defence systems. They then look for other or multiple ways into the company – chatbot, WhatsApp, phone, email, post – or they simply switch to a competitor. Both paths can cost more money than these systems will ever save.

**WHAT IS COMING:
CHOREOGRAPHIES OF ENCOUNTER**

After years of digital intoxication, many companies are starting to rethink. They are discovering that genuine encounters have value again. That it pays to create spaces where people can actually meet – in store, at events, in support. Companies are redesigning branches, reconsidering light, language and attitude, and bringing their staff back “onto the floor”. It is a real U-turn: once every process has been optimised to the last detail, the one part that cannot be fully pre-planned – the dialogue with the customer – becomes the new must-have. This is the shift from customer experience to human experience. Research is moving in the same direction. Studies on “intelligent contact centres” talk about “human-AI collaboration” systems that are deliberately built to keep technology and human beings in balance. The human moment is not replaced, it is orchestrated. Service becomes a choreography.

” HUMAN MOMENTS ONLY WORK
WHEN THERE IS TRUST – NOT
WHEN SUSPICION THROWS SAND
INTO THE GEARS.

**WHAT ELSE IS COMING:
SERVICE AS A STRATEGIC QUESTION**

By the way: “empathetic” chatbots – those that are meant to sound caring – are not exactly winning customers’ hearts so far. Sample line: “I understand that you are upset!” A few seconds later: “Please restart the process.” It is like someone saying “I love you” and then slamming down the phone. No chatbot in the world can replace a sincere “I’ll take care of this” from a human being. That is one reason why I am convinced: the future of service will not be decided by efficient systems alone, nor by smart tools, but by the service attitude that is written into the DNA of a company. This attitude is the heart of every successful brand. Customers come with concerns; they do not arrive as cash cows with customer numbers. They stay when they feel seen, understood and respected.

WHAT WE LONG FOR: HUMAN REALNESS

Recently, early in the morning, I was standing in the bathroom, hair still wet, when my phone rang. “Good morning, we’d like to present a new AI system that will revolutionise your customer management!” I replied, quite politely: “I really do not have time right now.” The answer: “Things are hectic here as well! We have lots of calls to make at the moment!” That AI was trained so absurdly badly that I am still laughing about it. Dear companies – please spare your (potential) customers this kind of artificial contact. It does not work. Put real people at the crucial touchpoints: wherever trust needs to be built, emotional distress needs to be caught, or a real solution must be found. AI cannot do that. At least not yet. We need human moments. →

WHAT WE ALSO LONG FOR: ZERO FRICTION

Of course, things can be quick as well. I love self-checkout when it runs smoothly: tap the card, grab the bag, leave. Wonderful. But reality? All too often there is an employee standing nearby, watching suspiciously to see whether every single item has really been scanned. A friendly service face is then turned into a distant security presence. Let us spare employees that role conflict. If processes are designed to run truly seamlessly, we do not need mistrust in between – it acts like sand in the gears. Human moments thrive on trust.

Service used to be a relationship.

Then it became a process.

Now it is becoming the core of the organisation.

Looking back over the past decades, I see a steady evolution: from service as a warm-hearted stroke of luck to the digital process logic of an organisation that is customer-centric, yet emotionally cool. And now, hopefully, towards a skilful symbiosis of both. •

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SABINE HÜBNER & TEAM

” EVERY BIG TECH DISRUPTION HAS TAUGHT US THE SAME THING: IN THE END, IT IS NOT THE TECHNOLOGY THAT MATTERS MOST – IT IS THE ATTITUDE BEHIND YOUR SERVICE.