

Lessons on 21st Century Client Satisfaction

The Leadership Gap

By Wilson Ramirez

March 2004

I am a gadget geek. I'm also a productivity freak. I love to have the latest technology and most of the times I squeeze the last drop of value of each new toy - I usually associate "value" with productivity, but that's my personal measurement. I get a very good return on investment in terms of productivity on most of my toys.

I also happen to believe in the value entitlement theory; the one that says that both the customer AND the company are entitled to the greatest possible value in each business transaction.

Value entitlement for the customer means that he/she is entitled to his/her fair expectation to receive the greatest quality product (whatever quality means in the customer's mind), at the lowest (cheapest!) possible price, and available now, right here and then. That's what we customers want. All the time. Every single day. With every single business transaction. As a professor of marketing of Queen's University used to say, customers are "sucking maggots", and that's the reality of life we have to live with - and in a competitive/capitalist economy, it's only a fair expectation that the customer IS entitled to.

At the same time, the company also has value entitlement - this means that the organization is entitled to obtain the greatest possible profit by delivering satisfactory (excellent? outstanding?) products, in each and every transaction. This is Economics 101.

Now, what is the link between value entitlement and my love for gadgets? The answer: the lack of leadership among organizations' managers.

Let me explain.

Having bought very many leading-edge gadgets, means that most of the time I buy things that not necessarily have been "market tested" (i.e. have been recently introduced to the market), and more often than not, they come with many defects built in. Having a quality management background, I have little tolerance for defects - as I am paying top dollars for what I believe is a reliable product - particularly when the products don't work properly out-of-the-box. Remember, I'm expected (and entitled) to receive value out of my business transaction, and my hard-earned cold currency that I'm paying.

These defects often lead me to spend unacceptable amounts of time (money), resources (money) and cash (money) on the phone, e-mail or in person with "customer service" representatives - my experience in these interactions has lead me to believe that a management consultant can be a customer service representative's worst nightmare. Don't get me wrong, I'm a very patient, calm and collected individual, who believes in human relations and empathy. But from that, to accept rudeness, mediocrity, lies, inefficiency, carelessness, and a dozen more adjectives that words are not enough to describe, is something else again.

Even though I shouldn't, at the end, I'm ready to bear less-than-satisfactory quality/performance in newly developed products, but by no means and by no circumstance am I ready to accept a company that doesn't even respect its customers. I wouldn't be concerned if this was an exception, or happened once in a blue moon, I'm concerned about this because it has happened in 80% of the cases that I am forced to "beg" the manufacturer to take care of me as a client, to have empathy and, at the very minimum, to listen to my problem. Is this asking too much?

After years of being passionate about the topic, I'm lead to believe that it is the lack of leadership on these "top" companies' managers (of which products we see marvelous advertisements every day) that has led to this unacceptable situation.

My assessment of the root-cause of why this situation happens over and over again is that the customer service associates, and usually their supervisors, are simply "doing their job" (at best). They are doing what they have been told to do. They are adhering to the organization's culture. It is "OK" to behave that way, because nothing happens if they do; and nothing happens if they don't. There are simply no immediate consequences for the associate, either positive or negative.

The worse indication of this is when you emphatically tell a customer service supervisor: "what you are doing will result in a totally dissatisfied customer," and they respond "I'm just doing my job".

Their managers, who focus on managing, and not on leading, are more concerned on "ticking the checklist" than on ensuring the great performance of their staff. They never seem to have the desire or time to motivate, influence and inspire their associates. It's been said that employees treat their customers the same way their manager treats them. If this is true, then the managers are doing a terrible job in threatening their employees, let alone developing their potential - and isn't this, in the end, the role of every manager? To grow/improve their business unit? ... Unfortunately, in this changing and competitive economy, if you're not getting better, you are getting worse. There are no in-betweens.

The lack of ability to inspire, motivate and utilize pretty basic human behaviour understanding on most managers in our "top" companies has led to this unacceptable situation. As a customer, I'm supposed to be entitled to get a quality product at a fair price - I am not only not getting this, but I'm getting disrespect, rudeness, and in the best cases complacency...this is all so far from what Ken Blanchard described in *Raving Fans*. This is all so far from being excellent, or even satisfactory.

As consultants, I believe, we have the duty to help our clients become a better organization; and that duty goes beyond designing a strategy, moving organizational boxes, improving a process, reducing costs or implementing a system.

... at the end, it's all about people.

Wilson Ramirez is the Principal Consultant of Wilson Ramirez & Associates, a consulting firm specialized in organizational leadership development. He can be reached at (416) 284-1799 or wilson@wilsonramirez.com. He currently chairs the membership committee of the GTA chapter of CAMC.

