

CUSTOMER CARE (DES 3102)

LECTURE : 7

TOPIC : Customer Communication

AIM : To understand the value of communications as the life-blood of developing and sustaining a service initiative.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter you should be able to understand

1. How a service philosophy can become part of the culture of an organisation via constant and consistent communication.
2. Developing a communication plan to ensure that the most appropriate medium is chosen to convey the message to the target audience.

TOPIC OUTLINE

- 7.1 Disseminating the message
- 7.2 Developing a communication strategy
- 7.3 Communicating service to external customers
- 7.4 Communication of service quality to the internal customer
- 7.5 Involving employees in developing internal standards
- 7.6 Reinforcing the message



Service quality cannot happen without communication. Communication is the life-blood of developing and sustaining a service initiative. Studies show that employers are increasingly recognising the value of communication in engendering a customer focus.

In this chapter we investigate how a service philosophy can become part of the culture of an organisation via constant and consistent communication. Integrating a service message into *all* organisational activities in both external and internal communication ensures that a service philosophy becomes part of everyday life.

We also investigate the need to develop a communication plan to ensure that the most appropriate medium is chosen to convey the message to the target audience, so that actions follow words.

7.1 Disseminating the message

An important principle of a service quality philosophy is open and two-way communication. The development of communication media to convey the service philosophy is a vital means of creating an awareness of the investment that an organisation is making in service.

There are many methods of communication, and organisations must be wary of not losing the message in the medium.

Surveys show that team briefing is the most common form of employee communication. Verbal communication is immediate and allows participation and interest, but calls for careful preparation and good presentation. Communication skills, such as listening and questioning, are important to encourage two-way dialogue. The disadvantages of verbal communication can be that the message may not be retained by the listener or that the message is not received in a uniform manner.

The Automobile Association has found, for example, that keeping team briefing concise and relevant is critical to its success. They also advocate making at least 50 per cent of the content local issues to generate greater interest and involvement.

Although written communication should ensure consistency of messaging in a timely manner, the written word is often open to misinterpretation.

Visual media such as videos are powerful methods of conveying a message as people learn most through sight. Most vital of all, the power of behaviour is often overlooked by management in organisations (see Figure 7.1).

Communication

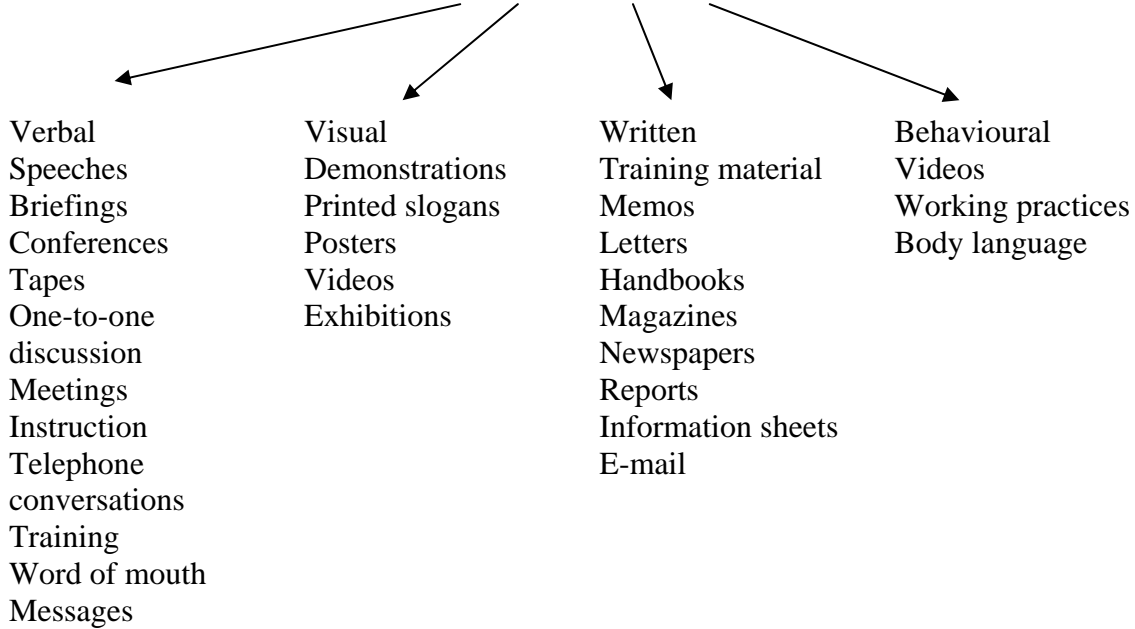


Figure 7.1 Some examples of verbal and non-verbal communication

Manager should be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each medium before developing a communication plan, which matches the media with the message. The AA uses a variety of media to communicate with its staff, including regular monthly mailshots targeted at patrols, a quarterly audio tape for field staff, a monthly magazine, videos, and an answer phone within 24 hours. Its communication objectives are to:

- Implement a framework for communication for its diverse and remote workforce;
- Create a climate where trust is re-established and where open communication is the norm;
- Inform, motivate and create a platform for dialogue, aimed at improving quality and reducing cost.

Regular and thorough communication is difficult in a call-centre environment with shift work, part-timers and heavy call volume. Southern Electric communicates on several levels: daily team-talks to review results and targets, monthly team briefs and weekly one-to-ones.

7.2 Developing a communications strategy

At the beginning of a customer service strategy, a communication strategy also needs to be developed to ensure the consistency of message to all stakeholders (see Figure 7.2). Lloyds Bank has followed organisations such as Texaco by developing communications charter and communications standards to ensure a consistent approach.

In addition, it is useful to debate and agree on a set of communication objectives in the light of each target audience. Then, a plan of action can be developed for how the service philosophy can be disseminated throughout the organisation on a long-term basis and, importantly, how feedback can be generated to ensure that the communication is two ways.

In developing a communication plan, factors to be considered include:

- How does the communication strategy fit into the overall service programme?
- What are the objectives of communication?
- What are the precise messages to be delivered?
- Who are the target audiences and where are they located?
- What is the current level of understanding of the audience?
- What is the culture in which they work?
- What communication channels are currently being used to communicate to this audience and how effective are they?
- What is the budget for communication overall?
- How can this budget be split?
- How can feedback be generated?

Management needs to consider all these factors before any form of communication design or development is undertaken. The reason for asking these sorts of questions is that it is easy to begin a programme of communication using sophisticated corporate messages which raise the expectations of employees and customers, only to flounder after several months when promises are not met or the messages fade away - if indeed the communication continues at all.

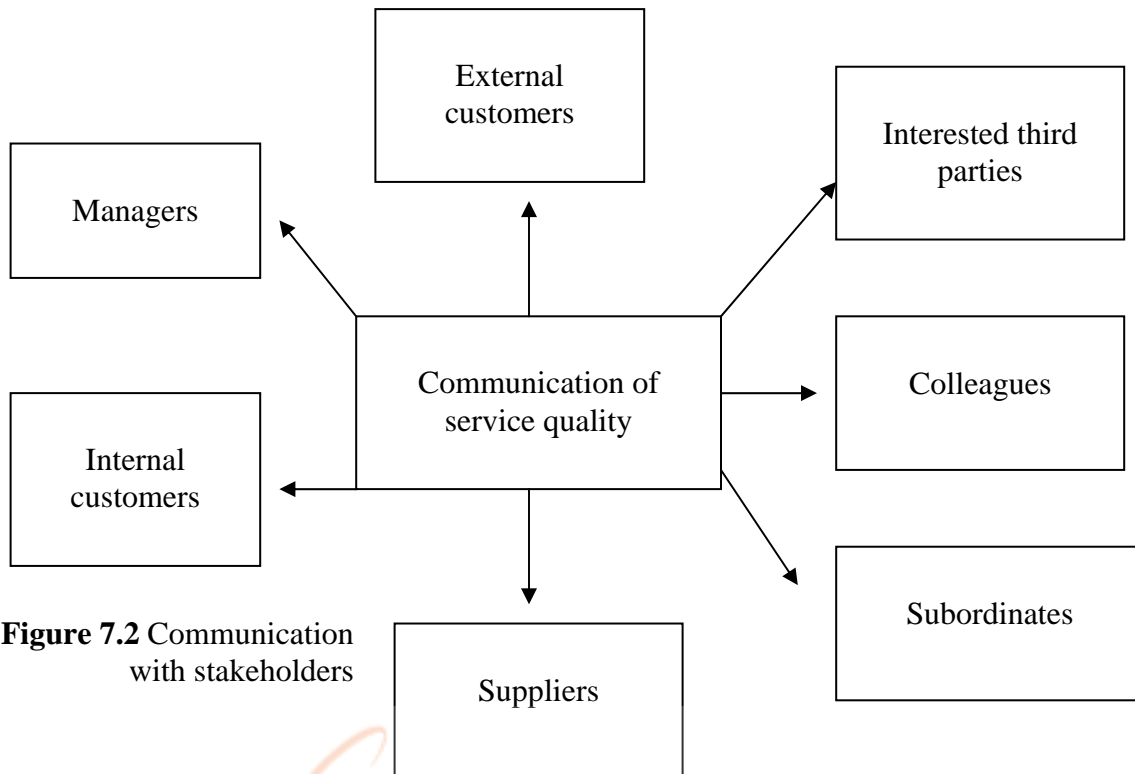


Figure 7.2 Communication with stakeholders



Once the organisation has made an investment in communicating its message, management should ensure that it is consistent (as long as this is appropriate), otherwise there is a real risk of de-motivating employees and disappointing customers with what may be perceived as a 'nine-day wonder'. Likewise, managers need to invite feedback and be prepared to *listen* and act upon comments and suggestions for change.

One organisation we worked with recently sent so many messages to its employees that the importance of customer service became lost. An attitude survey showed that members of staff were confused by the messages. Managers took the feedback on board and developed a much clearer and concise communication strategy.

7.3 Communicating service to external customers

Research by Bain and Co. reveals that 67 per cent of existing customers go elsewhere because no one keeps in touch with them. This is substantiated by studies conducted by Nortel Networks, which showed that customers who received frequent communication and feedback from the company were more loyal.

The customer's expectations of the standard of service he or she will receive are moulded by the past experience a customer has of a supplier and also the standards of service

which are communicated to the customer via other organisations in press advertising, television, word-of-mouth, via the Internet and other media.

An organisation should carefully consider how its service quality is communicated to its customers so that it does not 'over-promise and under-deliver'. Many retail outlets, banks and financial institutions place mission statements, customer's charters or customer policies in their outlets extolling 'the customer as king'. It is disconcerting to the customer, therefore, if the service he or she receives in that particular outlet does not match the standards of service that have been promised. A useful practice is to read customer-communication material or visit your organisation's web site to discover what customers are being told.

7.4 Communication of service quality to the internal customer

Just as the message given to external customers and the tone in which it is conveyed are important in reinforcing the importance of quality service, how this message is presented within an organisation often fashions employees' attitudes towards a service philosophy.

Employees should be the prime target audience of an organisation's communication plan. Undertaking an employee audit will provide managers with a better perception of how well communication policies are succeeding and help identify areas for improvement.

Managers at Texaco discovered that almost 50 per cent of people disagreed with the statement, 'I can express my opinion without worrying about getting into trouble', which was included as part of an employee attitude survey. As a result, a communications Quality Action Team was formed whose task was to change employees' poor perceptions. A customer charter for communications was developed. This included such items as:

- holding regular participative meetings of work groups (minimum standard: one per month with communications as a permanent agenda item);
- updated organisational charts/telephone directories and key departmental contact persons/points will be accessible to all (minimum standard: updated quarterly).

The results were that a far more open and responsive style of communication has been developed throughout the organisation.

7.5 Involve employees in developing internal standards

As the importance of internal service quality is recognised, many organisations involve employees in the development of internal standards and charters, which are then communicated to employee within the business. Here is an extract from HMV's internal standards for helping customers.

HMV CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS

HELPING CUSTOMERS

Customers will always feel they receive polite, helpful, friendly and efficient service in HMV Stores.

In all our contacts with customers we will:

- give customers priority over other tasks;
- make eye contact and greet each customer;
- focus attention on the customer, and be polite, friendly and interested throughout;
- respect individual customer tastes and preferences;
- apologise for any delay in giving service and advise actions we are taking to help;
- thank each customer, and end the contact in an appropriate way.

HELPING CUSTOMERS AT THE TILL

Customers will always feel they are given polite, efficient and friendly service at the till.

We will:

- never leave a customer waiting unattended at a till;
- ensure that customers do not feel they have been delayed unnecessarily;
- handle the transaction at a speed appropriate to the individual customer;
- point out offers, campaign and other useful information where appropriate;
- only interrupt a member of staff who is serving a customer when it is offer to help;
- treat products and payment with care, and hand goods to the customer.

Whitbread Inns identified the need to develop standards for every area of their pub operation. Three staff working parties were formed to agree best practice and develop a set of standards which were meaningful to staff and avoided the 'have a nice day' syndrome. These were then communicated to employees as part of an interactive training programme. (See Chapter 6, on the internal customer.)

7.6 Reinforcing the message

The development of material which impacts key messages as part of employees' working lives is also a useful means of reminding members of staff about customer care. When a logo or slogan is developed for a customer service strategy this can successfully be applied to such items as:

screen savers;
letterheads;
message pads;
pens;
mugs;
tee shirts; and
key rings.

These can be used in the employee's workplace and act as a useful reminder. They can also be used as prizes for suggestions of service improvements.

REFERENCES

1. Customer Care, (3rd Ed, 1992), Sarah Cook, Kogan Page.

TUTORIAL QUESTION- WEEK 9

1. What factors need to be taken into account in order to develop a communication strategy?

