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The Customer as Employee

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Think of the last time you used a self-service checkout, ordered your groceries online, banked online, self-checked in for a flight, or filed a tax return online. Service providers have increasingly focused on technology that essentially invites customers to ‘work for them’ for a small period of time. In other words, the customer is now expected to assume some of the tasks and responsibilities of a traditional employee. These ‘employees’ are, of course, unpaid, but are viewed by service organisations as a very productive resource.

Therefore, the following questions must be posed: who is really being empowered and how? How do customers feel about assuming this unpaid role? Are they even aware of the valuable inputs that they provide to companies that they engage with, and purchase from? What are the perceived benefits and rewards for customers who engage in the self-delivery of services?

Interestingly, the role of the customer as a ‘partial’ employee is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Customers have been programmed in the past to undertake a variety of ‘unpaid’ tasks, for example, returning your trolley to the trolley-bay at your local supermarket, or clearing away your table and throwing away your rubbish at your local McDonald’s restaurant.

However, the continuing advance of online and digital media has brought about an intriguing development for the broader retail, financial, travel and tourism sectors to name but a few. Customers are increasingly being asked to undertake a participatory role in creating a service through the usage of self-service technologies (SSTs). Essentially this means that service companies invite customers to co-produce a service through a technological interface.

The online platform through which consumers book a flight is a prime example. You access your chosen airline’s website and engage with an online booking system that asks you to input your travel requirements, choose a date/time and price that suits you, input your credit card details for payment and print your confirmation email. As you approach your departure date, you check-in online, and upon arriving at the airport terminal, you utilise the ‘bag-and-tag’ facilities. At no point of this process have you interacted with a human employee who traditionally would have conducted these tasks.

So the question must be asked: what is the payback for the customer? There are many perceived benefits and rewards, for example, the customer may avail of increased control over a purchase decision, like tailoring a menu on a supermarket’s online shopping service. Customers may also receive a positive psychological feeling due to ease of use, and may also avail of significant cost savings. The speed, time-saving and convenience of

being able to operate in a '24-7-365' online world, anywhere, anytime is of immense importance to customers.

From the service provider's perspective, using the customer as a partial, unpaid employee – a trend that has enormous potential to be exploited - has significant advantages. It can mean higher organisational productivity levels, improved efficiencies and better service performance. All of these may therefore combine to offer the organisation a competitive advantage in the marketplace and allow the company to invest in new product or market opportunities.

But the practical reality of customers acting as partial employees, increasingly through the usage of SSTs, may not be as straightforward and rewarding as one would expect. Supermarkets that operate self-service checkouts in their stores is an example. These self-check-out facilities are mostly designed for small shopping trips or quick 'basket shops', meaning the stores are offering time-saving and convenience rewards to relatively small-spending customers.

Such facilities are not designed to facilitate a big, weekly trolley shop, as all items must be placed on a very small carousel area. Instantly, this eliminates the large-trolley, high-value shopper from using the service. They may be willing and able to use the in-store self-check-out facilities, but they still have to queue at employee-manned checkout tills.

Inherent in the usage of such SSTs, is the customer's willingness and ability to learn about, and develop familiarity with, such technology. However, it is important to recognise that there are some customers who want to actively engage in a human service encounter, so it is also incumbent upon organisations to offer both a self-service option and the traditional human service in tandem. This situation has cost implications for the service provider.

A further issue to be addressed is the perceived manipulation of customers who undertake a role as a partial, unpaid employee. Indeed in some instances, there is a suggestion that customers are 'forced' into undertaking such a role. For example, many train passengers, upon entering a train station may find themselves 'forced' into engaging with a ticketing kiosk, as the ticket office may be closed.

The concept of the customer as a productive resource, and one that can be 'put to work', is receiving increased attention at present, facilitated by the onward march of online and digital advancements. If companies can attract and retain these unpaid staff members to be of optimal service to an organisation (and themselves), the benefits are enormous in the context of the current turbulent business environment.

However, more attention needs to be paid regarding the extent to which consumers are prepared to embrace SSTs, and whether they feel they are being empowered or indeed forced into using these technologies by the service provider.

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