

MAKING CRM WORK

How to unify an organisation
with a sense of purpose



**An interview with
Steve Hodges, Chief Executive
Astro Technology Group**

From a book commissioned by



Introduction

“You need to make people who aren’t your customers wish they were.” Gary Vaynerchuk, author of *The Thank You Economy* makes an interesting point.

Service, in short, is not what about what a company does, but who they are. It’s a reflection of the company’s personality.

A price advantage can be copied, but a strong customer service culture can’t be easily duplicated.

Customer service is the one asset that the competition cannot undersell. It’s the key differentiator in an age where ‘digital’ can easily result in a race to the bottom based on price.

In a report commissioned by Flowbird, business owners and directors from across generations and market sectors share their thoughts on customer relationship management and provide an their insight into how technology can be friend or foe in creating, building, and sustaining customer relationships.

This is one of the interviews to be included.

How to deliver really memorable service

It was something of an epiphany for Steve Hodges, the moment which changed his thinking about customer service.

“During my time in Canada, when a sales person or service provider asked ‘how’s your day’ I realised that actually they were expecting an answer not a monosyllabic response,” explains the chief executive of Astro Technology Group, an IT networks and infrastructure provider supporting operations for organisations such as The Kennel Club, Butlin’s, Wightlink, and Barchester Healthcare.

“I realised that wanting to take a genuine interest in the customer doesn’t come from a chief executive sounding off like a Mr Motivator. You can’t teach personality, and an intrinsic part of being able to deliver customer service is that it both personality and culture driven. Process in itself doesn’t make people willing to do something.

“I was asked to become CEO some ten years ago by the founders, technologists who had come from the corporate world who had realised the company’s focus had to be people. I said I was willing if they maintained that thought.



Steve Hodges

“There’s a real opportunity for companies now to up their game because young people coming into the workplace are enthusiastic and have grown up with technology. They want to be engaged and developed, and if a company doesn’t recognise that and meet their expectations, then it is unlikely at the sharp end it will be able to deliver stand-out customer service.

“It’s not a question of allowing people to take ownership of a customer service issue, but enabling them. Otherwise fear of doing the wrong thing means something can be badly handled or swept under the carpet and the customer ends up feeling more inconvenienced – not a characteristic of a business really committed to delivering good service.”

According to Hodges, too many companies implement technology which has the consequence of taking the place of human contact rather than enhancing it. “What technology should provide is

more options, rather than being a replacement for fundamental means of communication,” he says.

“There are so many examples of how the deployment of technology can perversely make it more difficult to develop a rapport let alone a relationship with the customer. A company will struggle to do either if the first interaction for a customer is with a chatbot.”

Technology should be deployed primarily to make it easier for the customer to engage with a company, Hodges maintains, but he doesn't think that's the main motivation for every business.

“I'm a yacht master instructor and I bought some kit online from a hardware manufacturer. When it arrived, I needed to ask about something, and then I realised there was no phone number for them, only an online form to fill out on their website,” he explains. “That might be more efficient for the company to be able to manage communication but for the customer it's an inconvenience. I teach ten students month on a course and I can tell you there's one company I don't mention as a possible supplier because of that customer service experience.

“Again, it all comes down to the real motivation for a company to put technology in place. If the primary purpose is to cut cost and reduce headcount, then it's for the wrong reasons. First and foremost it has to be about how to make things easier for the customer.



“Otherwise they will disengage. I wanted to report a fly tipping incident which had taken place in a nearby road, but when I phoned the local authority, an automated voice told me to go to their website. I couldn’t find an option there to report the incident so then I called the non-emergency police number. Another automated system told me if I wanted to report a road traffic accident I could do it on their website.

“At which point I gave up. So a crime which could have had potentially dangerous consequences went unreported because the customer-facing technology made it too difficult and time consuming.

“This was technology put in place from a technology perspective, not from a position of the person who would be trying to report an incident.”

Hodges also believes the management of information about the customer has a huge bearing on the delivery of customer service. “I can give you a simple example,” he says. “The handing over of a customer from one agent to another has to be seamless if that customer isn’t going to have the frustration of having to explain everything all over again.

“So investing in the right technology cannot be described as a discretionary purchase. Without the right level of information management, a company lacks a single view of the customer.

“Any process should be about improving the relationship with the customer first, with the role of technology being to support it – not technology first with the customer having to fit in.”

What Hodges finds “breathtaking” is how companies can say one thing and yet deploy technology which delivers the opposite. “How many times have you been told ‘your call is important to us’ and then have to wait twenty minutes before you are put through to anybody,” he points out.

“And I often wonder when I hear an automated voice saying a company will not tolerate verbal abuse of its staff, what degree of customer service failure must have taken place for that to have happened.”

As far as he's concerned, customer service should be memorable – for the right reasons. And properly applied, it's something where technology has a supporting role if that is to be happen more readily.

“When storms caused the cancellation of all flights from Gatwick, my partner who was now stuck at the airport was about to phone easyJet to find out what was going to happen,” he recounts.

“Just then her phone pinged and it was the airline emailing to say when she had been rebooked, details of the hotel they had arranged for the night, and the time of her dinner reservation.

“Now as well as a happy customer they also gained an ambassador – one hundred percent!”

www.astro.co.uk