Customer Focus in Business – My Career and My Learning

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"Customer is God. Customer is ultimate. We must work for Customer satisfaction, Customer delight, and Customer retention." We all hear this continuously in almost all the organizations as well as outside when we are in public. Probably in every presentation, every seminar, and every communication, we hear this. The Father of Nation talked about the customer more than sixty years back when globalization, IT, competitive life, modernization etc. were not the buzzwords.

I still remember the way we worked when I started my career as an R&D engineer in 1978. In those days, every application had to be studied and fully analyzed at the customer's premises. One can say that the design was actually conceptualized at his premises. The finer aspects were worked out after returning to the factory. The customer knew practically every engineer involved and one could expect a call directly at his residence for immediate solutions. The engineers had the design on their tips and could guide the customer; many a times on phone itself. Every system design was checked thoroughly before releasing to manufacturing and the engineers had to receive good amount of firing for every mistake they committed (for their own good of course). When we returned back from site, the general manager grilled us for all the settings, modifications, testing, performance trials, etc. All the modifications done had to be explained, agreed, and ratified in a subsequent meeting with the concerned engineers (from manufacturing, quality, commissioning, system design, order execution, and marketing) and permanent changes had to be released accordingly.

The words like ISO certification, TQM, and so on did not exist those days. But the concept of customer satisfaction did exist, even though we did not talk about it in every seminar. There was a definite focus on quality as a whole. The records, however, were always up to date because of the systems in operation and quality was realized through every possible way; including design, system checks, manufacturing processes laid down, operator's dependability, in house testing, and proper procedure for erection / commissioning. I think more than these factors what contributed to the reliability of the equipment were factors like sincerity, integrity, dedication, honesty while performing a task, and fully owning the individual processes and responsibilities.

Every engineer learnt almost all aspects of the engineering on job through shear hard work and because of threat of proper firing (which was also taken in a spirit). The fundamentals had to be in place without which one could not work independently. There was also a great degree of trust, as well as frank and free atmosphere, where one could tell the general manager also that you are INCORRECT (one can guess the superlatives used also). However, the onus was then on the concerned engineer to prove that the manager was incorrect. Yes, there were problems related to promotions, increments, and appreciation. Despite this I suppose, the system bound everybody neatly because it invited ingenuity, owning the failures, lot of learning and zeal to learn, respect for seniors for their experience and knowledge, respect for them while learning and inheriting, freedom of expression while giving

suggestions and making improvements. The system was such that practically everything had to be learnt hard way with absolutely no shortcuts possible. Further, all good qualities like dedication, sincerity, honesty, integrity, hard work, patience, and perseverance had no boundaries and hence needed to be stretched to whatever higher extent one can decide to stretch it. In fact the system invited it. You had no option but to rise through ranks. One can only imagine the substantial efforts required for anybody to raise above all these levels, also and equally exerted by others, to differentiate him to get into any one of the upper slots. The best aspect of the system in place was that the engineer could never forget his fundamentals and had to acquire a broad vision to look at any operational / new technical system from top / apex, before he could get inside up to the required point of interest for analyzing the issue. Directly or indirectly, service to the customer remained always on top priority and attended to with equal sincerity from all the angles.

We all talked about the end customer then also. We talk about the end customer today also. Then what is the difference between yesterday's and today's conditions?

The experience and comparison show that several good things happened but the approaches changed. Let us have a look at what good changes came through, which could have helped all the good practices, processes, quality of our services to the end customer, and also our efficiency to serve him.

The most important changes (restricted to my field Electrical Engineering) relate to computers coming in a big way with Internet / Intranet and PC's ruling the information technology, communication becoming relatively much faster with different gazettes available, lot of technological changes coming through materials, digital controls with fast processors and DSP's, simulation platforms, power devices, drive systems, and virtually the electronics and power electronics dominating every aspect of Electrical Engineering.

The other changes (in general) include presentation methods, documentation in soft form, ease of access to substantial information, automation in processes, accuracies in every aspect of technology submission and utilization. It also made us understand optimized operations, international demands and competition, and work with highest degree of efficiency while cutting all unwanted corners.

But all is not well on the personal side. This includes some kind of cut and paste attitude, more stress on the sophistication of presentation than the real contents, two minute maggi noodle attitude, lethargic attitude to address the real problem, spending more time on who should solve and answer the technical issue rather than employing one's mind on it, half hearted attitudes, reduction in one's analytical capabilities, attitude to throw the problem in somebody else's court and still justify that this is not my problem, and so on. The overall impact continued based on simplified understanding of the famous Ohm's law, i.e. more current will flow in less resistive / impedance path. Thus the efficiency (with which we deserved an opportunity to react and retain our customers with the help of these improved tools and basic good qualities available at our disposal), instead of increasing dramatically, in fact went down and suffered owing to these negative attributes that got into the system over a period of time.

We expected that the modern technology would satisfy the customers. However, what is forgotten is that complete personal dedication is important even today in satisfying the customers.

The liberalization brought dollars to our doors allowing easy horizontal movements across the world and many young / experienced people who lost their valuable learning and core engineering ability while changing to the software jobs and thereby the real focus of their basic education. It created a big

void in normal operations of engineering companies since the technical expertise was lost to software companies.

On the other hand, I also could see significant change in the personal paradigm. We seem to be more worried about how to remain in good books of management rather than remaining in good books of our customers who can trust us and see us as dependable and friend in need. Our internal threat seems to make us more uncomfortable rather than the external threat from the customer. This is in total contrast with what we hear in our internal talks and discussions. Somewhere and somehow, we seem to be doing exactly the opposite to what we agree and what we are supposed to do. As a result, finally we all suffer; the company suffers in turn, and worst is that the customer suffers. This means we seem to be drifting away from the true satisfaction of the customer and his retention. I hope we all honestly agree to this situation.

I now come to another important and relevant question. Does it mean we all work under some kind of a constant fear? Probably yes. What is this fear? Losing a job? Losing credibility? Losing promotions or worrying about demotions? The analysis tells me that all these factors count as a fear. Further, we tend to get more conscious about our image, within and outside the company. This is in nutshell.

But why should we be so much worried? Why not learn to call spade a spade at all the times? I think the answer lies in we becoming bold but not arrogant, honest but not shy, answerable but not offensive, firm and assertive but not impolite, understanding but not over sentimental, analysts but not diplomatic, realistic and confident but not overconfident, ambitious to reach the top but not by stepping on other's shoes.

Few days back, I happened to read an interview of the great Socialist Shri Baba Amte. The future belongs to whom was the question asked to him. He calmly replied that it belongs to "common man with uncommon determination". I think it summarizes the issue. The future belongs to all of us as a common man. Yes, we need a very high degree of determination to do justice for our customers and in a broad sense to the relative future which involves the customer and us together.

Something which I now can add and I am sure this will help us to retain close and valuable relationship with the customer.

I learnt lot of things from my Ph.D. which I joined after acquiring around 11 years experience in industry. To put it more importantly and humbly, it made me learn that I really don't know many things. This in itself was a great realization and discovery. It made me feel so small but not guilty. It made me improve upon my analytical skills and made me understand that the efforts required to deliver even a small contribution can be extremely large. It made me develop never give up kind of attitude.

I have walked 57 km seven times from Baroda to get Bhagwan ShriKrishna's Darshan at Dakore. Thanks to my colleagues who inspired me to do it. The Dakore walking down and the Ph.D. experience have taught me and made me realize something very special that I have to stretch and keep stretching the boundaries of all good qualities like determination, honesty, integrity, patience, perseverance, hard work, and hardcore engineering (which is must for all of us as the practicing engineers) to achieve even a small and good contribution. All the fears will have to be driven out of our minds to cultivate and nurture these qualities.

With due respect to all those who helped me, taught me, and have contributed to my life, I humbly state here that development experience of over fifty products / systems to meet all challenges of Indian

customers and environment that I gained, stands for me as an example of stretching the boundaries of all good qualities as mentioned above. Over a period of time the technologies that we could produce / continue to produce in India (in my stay with all the organizations) included those for all core sector and other industries, railways and Metro's, electricity boards and many other customers. List is not important. What is important to be noted is that we had a faith in ourselves that we can develop technologies parallel to those available abroad and at a much cheaper cost and embed in it the reliability required to work with weak grids in India and more importantly match it with the Indian customer's expectations.

The Indian customer needs 20/500 formula to be applied and realized rather than 100/100 formula. What does it mean? It means if a product or a system is available at Rs 100 with 100% reliability specified for it, one need to deliver the same product or system in India at a cost of Rs 20 and with 500% reliability (as good as maintenance free). This is the biggest challenge in India and if one delivers against it, I am sure the products and systems can easily find their acceptance abroad. I am glad that at least I and the people who worked with me tried it and have been successful in many cases. In fact in some cases the customer gave us the order at a higher price than quoted (possibly unheard in Indian commercial history), since he properly understood the difference between the two formulae.

What is possible often lies just on the other side of our self-created boundary of impossible. What is needed is just a little bit of overstretching.

I submit my sincere thanks to all those people for the opportunity they gave me in conceptualizing the products / systems and bringing them in reality. The learning was very / extremely hard way as it involved full appreciation of the customer's applications vis-à-vis the real delivery. The people from the lowest ranks teach us a lot. We need to have open and egoless mind to learn it from them and absorb it for future understanding. Learning is a penance and a never ending process.

The customer teaches you lot many things inclusive of technical and nontechnical issues involved. Meeting therefore the customer requirements as a whole is a challenge to be taken by its spirit. The word "concept", if taken in a broad sense, reflects not only conceptualizing the so-called product or system, but also conceptualizing the customer's overall needs as a total solution. Moment this chord is struck, half the battle is already won.

Retaining the customer is reflecting sincerity in addressing and meeting all that is conceptualized. This also, hence, has a broad sense. It is hence a commitment, which stretches much beyond the product one offers to the customer. He looks forward to continued support not only for the product he has from you, but also for associated system, its appreciation, and many a times solutions to issues which may not be directly relating to the supplied product. In one line it can be summarized as, he relates himself to you for long-term association. This is a marriage for long term retention of the customer, which has "trust" as the major binding factor.

I give an example here to clarify it. We had an opportunity to exhibit the whole process from "Concept to Retention" in case of Tata Motors. This is a customer where the order for the 1800 kVAR Dynamic Reactive Power Compensator (DRPC or Statcon) for the Indica Spot Welding was almost lost when we entered the Tata premises. Tata's were technically convinced about the real need of Statcon for the application and that it cannot be met by the solution they were provided by some other party. The proto was developed specifically and demonstrated to Tata's. The Statcon was sold and the rest is history. Today my earlier organization has the appreciation from Tata Motors who have approved Statcon as a well-addressed and proven product for dynamic reactive power compensation for spot welding

application in automobile industry. For the expansion, Tata Motors wanted us to write the core specifications for the exact compensation process for the spot welding application, which subsequently found its way in the new tender specifications. This is the respect paid by a customer to my earlier organization. Over a period of time, number of technical needs have been addressed for Tata Motors and solutions have been suggested. The interaction has continued binding both Tata Motors and my earlier organization in a healthy and trusted relationship. In my opinion, it stands as an example for "Concept to Customer Satisfaction and Retention" perhaps as an example for any organization.

I can never forget the teachings and blessings of all those seniors with whom I had an opportunity to work and learn from and I honestly acknowledge the same today with all my humility.

Finally I come to my real learning and what I can share truly with all. When I look back, the years convince me that the success of any company lies in how honestly we develop and pursue the basic qualities (determination, honesty, integrity, patience, perseverance, hard work, and hardcore engineering) and how effectively we can use all the technology based tools available to us to improve everything that is related to the customer. That will decide / answer how close we are in achieving Customer Satisfaction, Delight, and Retention. After all, these are real rewards for every company and also to all of us.

What is my honest realization then?

Treat every customer as if your world revolves around him. In fact it does!

Please note: I have written this article without any prejudice to anybody, with due respect to all the people and also with all my sincerity and humility. Having already completed over 37 years of my professional life, and also having completed 60 years, I thought I have an occasion to share my experience and learning with all, specifically in relation to "Customer Focus". I hence humbly request all to take the article by its spirit and appreciate my respect for the organizations I worked with (M/s Larsen and Toubro Limited, M/s ABB Limited, and M/s Autometers Alliance Limited) and also the organization I am currently working with (M/s Shreem Electric Limited).