

Find a way into the hearts of customers

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Imagine a couple goes in to see a doctor who tells them their child will be born with a genetic disorder. It is mid-morning and when they emerge from their consultation, they see a row of parents bouncing their healthy children on their laps. The emotional shock they have just experienced with the doctor will now be compounded by feelings of appalling unfairness. Why us?

While the genetic test results cannot be changed, the process by which prospective parents are informed could be. The couple could be asked in to the clinic in the early morning or evening, when there are no other patients around. They could be shown out through a side door, so they don't have to see babies right after they receive their bad news.

It is not just doctors' offices that could find ways to improve the process by which they handle emotions. Airlines dealing with delayed passengers, insurance companies dealing with traumatised claimants, management consultants explaining their bill could all benefit from a better understanding of the emotional peaks and troughs experienced by their customers.

In [Designing the Soft Side of Customer Service](#), a paper recently published in the MIT Sloan Management Review, Sriram Dasu and Richard Chase of the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California argue that emotions are too rarely included in operations design.

Operations managers, Prof Dasu told me, regard emotions as too soft an issue to be integrated into the blinking lights and spinning discs of their world. "They don't realise that emotions are very process driven."

Let's say you have bought a laptop and within the first month of owning it, it fails three times. Your third call will be a more emotionally intense call than your first. But will the laptop manufacturer assign a more seasoned service agent to deal with you? Or will you simply be led through the same complaint process you experienced with your first call? In the paper, the pros say that companies should design "emotion prints" of the customer experience and tailor their processes accordingly. Emotions are far more predictable and manageable than many operations managers believe. You do not need heroic individuals with extraordinary levels of emotional intelligence to make dramatic interventions. Rather, the process can be designed more like a factory line, with variables that can be managed and measured.

One advantage of this approach is that it takes broad intentions such as improving customer service and makes the process detailed and actionable. You do not need to train all employees in the same way. Rather you can identify the emotions they most frequently deal with and train them to deal with those.

For example, explains Prof Dasu, bellboys and concierges are trained to display an "attitude of invitation". This is what matters most when guests arrive. Similarly, a few US sports teams are now training everyone from the ticket-taker to the hot dog vendor to welcome customers as if they were welcoming them into their home. Fans come to games excited and stadium employees should find ways to deliver service that recognises that mood.

The professors focus on designing for emotions, trust and control. The first step means crafting that emotion print and allocating resources to deal with customers at the emotional high and low points of their interaction with you.

Designing for trust is about trying to create the best environment for doing business. This is the silver bullet for managing customer relationships. A trusting customer believes you have their best interests at heart. One who mistrusts you will constantly be demanding explanations and price reductions and making life a misery. Trust evens out the emotional volatility in any relationship.

Designing for control is closely linked to designing for trust. People will accept less control over a process if they trust you. But you can also manage those feelings of control. [FedEx](#) does it by allowing you to track your packages. You cannot make it move faster, but by letting you know where the parcel is, FedEx is assuring you it is delivering on its promise. Setting and then meeting deadline expectations is a simple way to create feelings of trust and control.

Designing for control also lets people manage their own emotions. When the stock market is down, you can decide whether to look at your investment portfolio. Imagine how different it would be if every week,

your investment manager had to call you and explain his performance.

“Companies already do a lot of this, but operations managers still treat emotions as outside their bailiwick,” says Prof Dasu. “They get queasy when you bring them up.”

But they will wish someone had the moment customers gravitate to competitors that treat them as emotional rather than purely rational or financial beings.

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