

# **Building strong relationships with customers**

A Guest Article by Tim Aston  
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### **Rediscovering the human touch in customer interactions**

Increasing sales and service performance while building strong relationships with customers and staff is a driving force in all businesses.

In reality, large, complex organisations find it difficult to deliver significant change in these areas. The larger the organisation, the more difficult it is to build any kind of meaningful relationship with customers. Why?

#### **Missing ingredients**

Think about your own personal experience interacting with large organisations. Fundamental ingredients are missing: the “human touch” – the emotional, relationship-building and common sense ingredients that we all use when building relationships with other people – have been designed out of customer-facing sales and service processes.

Today’s way of working, put simply, is about data and efficiency. But, no matter how accurately data is captured and how cleverly manipulated, it is still just cold, logical fact. To make customer interactions come to life, to make them work for your organisation, you need to rediscover the human touch and, most importantly, build it back, via process design, into multi-channel customer interactions.

#### **Delivering step-change improvements**

Take any system and train a number of people to use it: the result will always be that a minority will outperform the others. It’s this difference between the best and the rest that holds the answer.

We are all different. We all do things differently. In fact, we all *like* to do things differently. So, large, complex businesses need to consider expanding the thought process from the current data-driven, linear and one-size-fits-all approach to customer interactions.

There is an opportunity to think differently about process design and to deliver added value and appeal to everyone, staff and customers alike. It has been proved that embedding the human touch back into customer processes delivers step-change improvements in performance and results.

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### **How to make the rest as good as the best**

Somehow we need to capture, analyse and bottle how the best people interact and communicate. What are they doing, over and above the same processes that everyone else is using, that makes them perform consistently better?

The starting point is to consider internal front-line sales or servicing teams. They all have exactly the same tools and training, and yet a small percentage will always outperform the rest. When you look at why, it's the intangibles that surface: relationship building, understanding and empathy, listening and knowing what questions to ask – the human touch.

Typically, organisations look at their best performers and think: "We'll watch and capture what they do and replicate it for others to use." However, this is not as easy as it sounds.

### **Designing the human touch into core processes**

Logical, rational business efficiency can be designed into any system. But the human touch, common sense approach is not so easily captured, and normally ends up in the training room. And if training is not used in context and on a daily basis, it soon gets forgotten.

This is where the application of the latest thinking on multiple intelligences and other psychology models is key to understanding what is really happening in a front-line interaction, on both sides – customer and staff. The understanding and relevant human touch elements can then be captured and made accessible to others by designing them back into core processes.

### **Delivering meaningful customer interactions**

We can use the analogy of a stage play to understand the resulting design. First, give the actors a topic. Second, fit the stage with all the props and scenery needed to tell a story. Now allow the actors to use the props in the way that suits them best to tell the story in their own way, with prompts on how to get to the next step. The result: an individual performance that is owned by the actor, told in their preferred style, and authentic, real and engaging, within a tight structure.

This style of process design for businesses delivers intuitive, fast and meaningful interactions with customers. It significantly improves performance, along with staff and customer satisfaction.

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### **Training the emotional brain**

In his book *Decisive Moment*, Jonah Lehrer tells how airplane accidents caused by poor decision making have been reduced by 71%. This has been achieved by the introduction of flight simulators.

### **Limitations of abstract learning**

“The old way of teaching pilots was the ‘chalk and talk’ method,” says Jeff Roberts, the group president of civil training at CAE, the largest manufacturer of flight simulators. Before pilots ever entered the cockpit, they were forced to sit through a long series of classroom lectures. They learned the basic manoeuvres of flight while on the ground.

They were also taught how to react in the event of various worst-case scenarios. What should you do if the landing gear won’t deploy? Or if the plane is struck by lightning? “The problem with this approach,” Roberts says, “was that everything was abstract. The pilot had this body of knowledge, but they’d never applied it before.”

Much training in business is like this – good in theory, but limited in practice.

### **Internalising new knowledge**

The benefit of a flight simulator is that it allows pilots to internalise their new knowledge. Instead of memorising lessons, a pilot can train the emotional brain, preparing the parts of the cortex that will actually make the decision when up in the air.

Embedding good practice into process design and execution, like the flight simulator, makes the good practice real and lasting.

Training, even though it has moved on from “chalk and talk”, can still be too abstract. However, experiences of the best can be captured and used, in a lasting and easily accessible way, by the many. And just like the pilots who were able to use flight simulators, people get better and better at what they are doing.

### **Principles applied successfully**

These principles have been developed and applied in UK banking, and also in the public sector, with considerable success, consistently achieving performance increases of 25%+ and in some cases over 200%.

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In the banking sector the standard sale per customer review is 1 (plus or minus 15%). This was increased to 1.8 and, in some cases, to 5 product sales/leads per review.

In the public sector, efficiencies of 47% were achieved by redesigning processes to focus on the customer, thereby reducing the number of avoidable contacts.

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If you would like more information on any of the points covered in this Guest Article, please contact **TCii** on **020 7099 2621**.