

Creating Great Customer Experiences for Relocating Employees:

How Exceptional Customer Service Can Be Your Competitive Edge —

PART 1

BY JANE NEUMILLER-BUSTAD

In the world of relocation, great customer service can make all the difference between an average transaction and a terrific experience for the relocating employee and his or her family. Neumiller-Bustad examines how relocation management companies can use exceptional customer service to build a competitive edge.

Poor customer service has reached epidemic proportions here in the United States, but we are not alone.

Employees from many different countries relocating from overseas assignments have stories to tell, too. Rudeness, inattention to customer needs, and an unwillingness to go the extra mile for the customer are everyday occurrences for many people across the globe.

In the world of relocation, great customer service can make all the difference between an average transaction and a terrific experience for the relocating employee and his or her family. This becomes a critical business differentiator for your organization—whether you are the company transferring the employee or a third-party company serving a variety of clients.

In his latest book, “The World is Flat,” author Thomas Friedman explores the changes that have taken place around the world as the technology revolution has affected India, China, Eastern Europe, and other areas of the world.

High-speed Internet access, website-authoring tools, blogs, and powerful search engines allow people around the globe to create, package, and disseminate information at a rate unknown at any other time in human history. That creates enormous new opportunities for businesses of all sizes and in all locations—including those in the relocation industry.

The Implications

This technological shift has at least five customer service implications:

1. The “third world” isn’t third any more. Smaller countries are growing in sophistication, education, and expectations, and companies all over the world are competing with each other. “World-class service” takes on new meaning in this type of environment. Delivering an “adequate” or “good” relocation experience is not enough to distinguish your company from your competitors—some of whom may be in other countries or operate mainly over the Internet.

2. A “flatter” world. As the influence of the Internet continues to spread, information becomes more widely available to people, creating the “flattening” effect Friedman alludes to in his book title. Simply providing information about the relocation pro-

cess is not a competitive advantage—it is a commodity. Your business has to create an exceptional “experience” for your client that boosts your image above the competition.

3. Employee talent from everywhere. As companies in other countries grow their businesses, the competition for employee talent increasingly becomes a global contest. Thus, relocation companies are competing globally, as well. Your competition is not just the company down the street or across the country—it potentially is in any corner of the world where there is an Internet connection.

4. Price is everything—maybe. It is a reality in today’s Internet-based marketplace that both consumers and businesspeople tend to base their purchasing decisions solely on price. If you are not the lowest-priced relocation provider, your challenge is a steep one—how do you distinguish yourself in the midst of a sea of similar competitors? On the other hand, if you wish to be the lowest cost provider of relocation services, tomorrow may bring another company willing and able to go even lower.

5. Creativity stands out. Companies hoping to compete in the flatter world need to develop creative, innovative, and engaging customer service strategies to serve the needs of

their relocation clients or relocating employees.

Cost

Globalization also has an effect on the cost of relocation services. Internet technology reduces the costs required to provide many relocation services. While this can be a positive trend, it also has a negative effect.

Relocation services have become “commoditized.” “Commoditization” is the process that turns any product or service into a commodity—something that is purchased on price alone. We live in an era in which “price” is the driving factor in most buying decisions, whether it is the consumer or a corporation doing the purchasing.

Organizations that succeed in crafting exceptional customer service experiences can help remove themselves from the “commoditization competition.” To be one of those organizations, you must prove that the value of an exceptional customer experience is worth far more than the actual price that is paid.

Value

What is the value of a transferred spouse being comfortable with his or her new home? The value of finding the perfect school for a transferee’s child? What is the value of an effortless transaction to a corporate relocation specialist? What is the value of an efficient problem-resolution process? Or the value of paying a small moving claim instead of making the transferee jump through hoops to validate the damage?

People gravitate toward exceptional customer experiences (in part because they experience so few of them) because they create high value for the customer—whether that value is tangible or intangible.

But what determines if a product or service is of “high value?” Our customer service classes always include a slide with the following equation: “Value equals benefits minus costs.” It is important to remember that customers constantly perform this mental calculation.

Benefit

Customers always are weighing the

cost of your product or service against any potential benefits they stand to gain. You must prove that the time, cost, energy, or any other type of savings the customer gains is worth the cost—whether financial, emotional, status-related, or time-based.

Exceptional customer service has a higher benefit to the customer than what it costs him or her to obtain the service—particularly when you consider the emotional component. People love feeling special, unique, and cared for. When a customer has an encounter that makes him or her feel that way, the benefit far exceeds the cost.

To kick-start the process of developing engaging customer service strategies, the central question that any organization needs to ask is: “What experience do I want my customer to have when he or she interacts with us?”

To create an ideal customer experience, take the time to envision a “perfect” customer encounter within your particular organization. Use a series of questions that force you to look beyond the obvious.

- What is the customer seeing?

Possibilities include friendly faces, luxurious surroundings, or perhaps a well-designed website.

- What is the customer hearing?

Could it be laughter, music, or a foreign language? Is there a standard greeting he or she should hear? A warm and genuine tone of voice?

- What is he or she touching?

Maybe it’s a brochure, a child’s teddy bear, or an apartment entry keypad.

- Are there smells involved? Think about the aroma of chocolate chip cookies warm from the oven, a dozen roses, or the smell of clean laundry.

- What about taste? A cold glass of soda, a sip of fine wine, or an exotic meal could be part of the customer’s experience.

- If your customer was to use one word to describe his or her experience with your organization, what word would he or she choose? If the customer expressed his or her feelings in one sentence, what would he or she say? If he or she wrote a paragraph, how would it read?

A World-class Experience

Crafting a wonderful customer

experience starts by creating a mental image of your desired end state—a delighted customer—and working backward from there. The questions above are just a starting point; do not be afraid to dream big and envision a dramatic customer experience.

Keep another scenario in mind as you work: envision your ideal customer encounter. Customers are comparing experiences across a wide range of different businesses. A customer will compare your relocation assistance with the service he or she received this morning from his or her bank, weekly contact with his or her Internet-based DVD rental service, the restaurant he or she dined at last night, or last's week's doctor visit.

World-class service does not mean world-class in comparison with other relocation companies; it means world-class in comparison with every positive experience the customer has ever had with every organization he or she has ever encountered.

That is a pretty tall order, but this comparison is happening on a daily basis. Even if your organization is at the top of the heap in the eye of the customer today, tomorrow is another day and you may find yourself in second, third, or fourth place before you know it.

For a corporation, creating an exceptional relocation experience for transferring employees becomes both a recruiting and talent retention tool. Word will spread about the quality of the relocation experience for both the transferee and his or her family.

For a third-party relocation company, creating a reputation for exceptional customer service serves both corporate clients and the individual transferee.

In next month's article, I will examine some of the practical tools you can use to create an exceptional customer experience for your relocation clients and relocating employees. ■



Jane Neumiller-Bustad manages customer service training for PROSOURCE Educational Services, a division of Kaplan Professional Schools, in St. Paul, MN. She can be reached at +1 651 523 1095 or e-mail jane.neumiller-bustad@kaplan.com.