

Leadership in Turbulent Times

As an organisation navigates **turbulent** times, its legacy depends on its adaptability and transformation.

Preparedness and the ability to maintain a focus on growth will determine its **future**.

In our inaugural issue, we aim to highlight strategic leadership techniques and styles



employed by top-notch business leaders during this **economic turmoil**.



OCTOBER 2023
LKR 1,000 /-

LEADING WITH CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE DURING CRISIS



IN A NUTSHELL...

The article emphasizes the importance of customer experience during crises. It highlights the need for leaders to focus on positivity, passion, belongingness, proactivity, and authenticity to create an excellent customer experience.

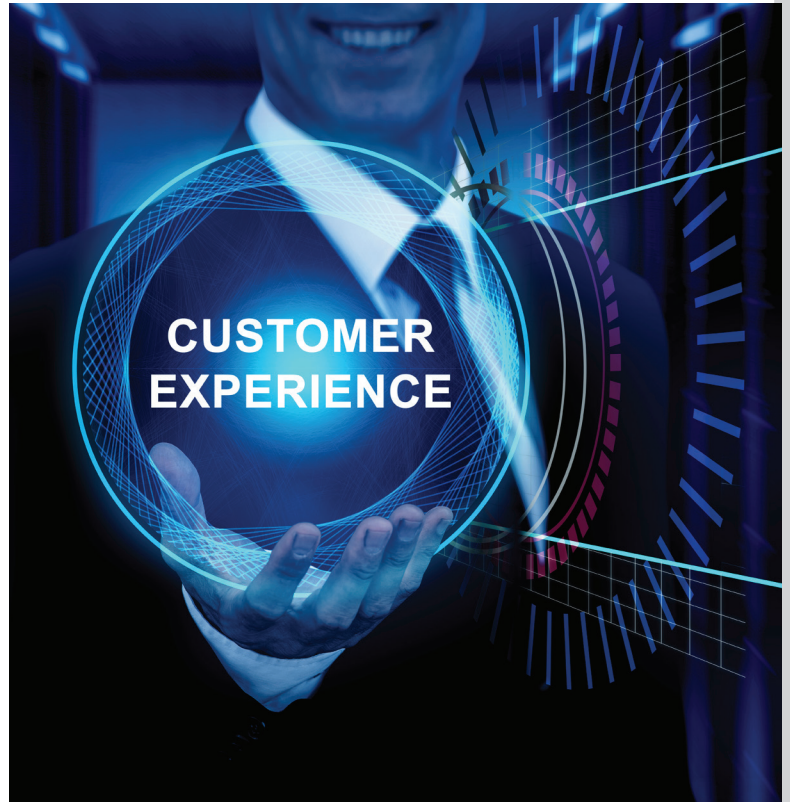
While technology plays a role, human interaction, empathy and understanding are essential for genuine customer care. Leaders should invest in staff training, adapt proactively to challenges and prioritize authenticity to build trust and loyalty with customers, especially in uncertain times.

From economic downturns to global pandemics, the past decades have tested businesses with a series of challenges. The role of leaders has changed significantly, given the new normal combined with the need to reinvent the approach to creating a "customer experience" to strengthen ongoing and new relationships.

During crisis times such as these, understanding ways and means of providing a good "customer service" at every changed and new points of interaction and creating a great "customer experience" has challenged the traditional approaches to customer interaction.

Understanding the exact requirements on the customers' side and meeting and exceeding customer expectations at "each touch point" and providing the service to the best of the organizations's ability to nullifying the impact of new "pain points" on the customer has become critically important today.

BY DHAMMIKA KALAPUGE *



In these trying circumstances how can leaders of the entities drive difficult new approaches with the use of "common sense" has become a massive task today.

In doing so both "online" and "offline" journeys, from initial click to post-purchase review, should be critically reviewed, hindrances or faults should be identified and ironed out, so that "customer experience" is seamless from 'start to the end'.

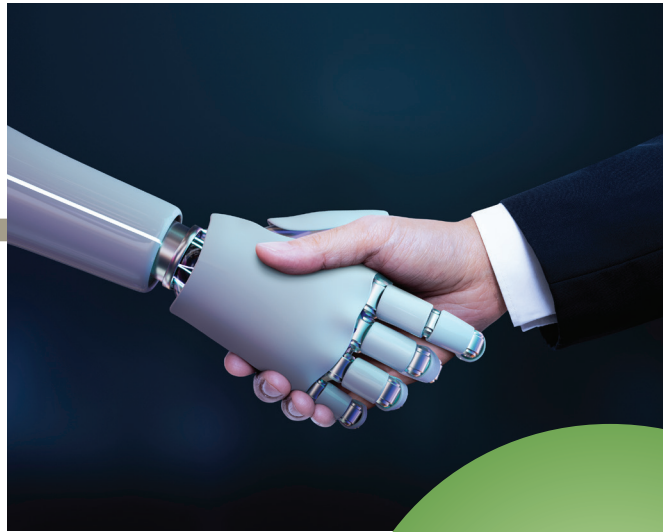
Modern research proves that customers consider the "experience" a company creates to be as essential as its "products and services." In achieving the above, the emphasis should be given to "be brilliant" with the following "basic attributes" in setting up an "excellent customer experience culture."

POSITIVITY

In general, when a positive attitude in customer service is established, the service staff will appear more focused and responsive to the expectations of customers. This in turn gives customers an indication, right at the inception of the service encounter itself, that they are being heard, respected and cared for by the organisation. This is important as ninety per cent of lasting impressions are created during the first ninety seconds of interaction and one will never get a second chance to make a very good first impression.

When service staff demonstrate positivity, they would be able to "hear" more than just the spoken words; the underlying real requests/needs of customers. Such staff will express empathy and care by making a concerted effort to understand the thoughts and feelings of customers, which is what customers expect in every situation. Staff with positivity are happy employees who will make every attempt to make customers happy.

In a crisis situation when negative vibes are at its peak, every little positive thought, word and deed demonstrated by the service provider go a long way to satisfy the customer. The positivity can be demonstrated through; "How are we trying to put the customer at ease to fulfil its requirement?," "How can we be a part of the solution rather than being a part of the problem?," "How can we provide digital convenience to enhance the efficiency of the service delivery?," "To what extent are our staff being empowered to perform effectively when resolving customer's precise requirements promptly?," "When something unexpectedly goes wrong are we sincerely acknowledging it with responsibility?" and 'How



creative are we in solving customer's requirement's with accountability?"

PASSION

This means service provider's enthusiasm to perform the task with a "burning desire" to fulfil the customer's requirement. The service provided through human interactions is the best way for businesses to separate from the others. Nevertheless, now for everything, are we over depending or directing the customer for system-based solutions? Obviously, today's technology is needed in serving modern customers and employees effectively. However, technology is yet only a tool to improve the service delivery and relationships but not a replacement to human interactions. Hence, are we using the technology to enhance the touch? Strongly consider the fact that "technology can deliver; humans can over deliver."

In an era where products can be replicated and services can be matched, it is the "emotional connection" passionately built through "human touch" that sets brands apart. It is the way to build a "Distinctly Sustainable Differentiation" as today's customers look beyond the product, valuing the overall experience and emotional resonance a brand offers. This is often referred to as "Irreplaceable Magic of Human Interactions." Amidst automated emails and chatbots, the "human touch" remains golden. The laughter shared during a support call, the genuine concern expressed during a crisis, or the spontaneous gesture of goodwill – these remain carved in customers' memories.

It is better to educate this generation that grass is not as green, as one thinks, at the other side. Because of this migration dilemma, the younger staff lack focus and loyalty to their work place.

The fast growing "AI and tech" have its own places, yet maintaining a "human touch" is essential. Humans play a vital role in establishing caring cultures that leads to organisations to be service oriented. In doing so the accepted norm is that the "core values" of the organization will have a significant influence to drive the required behaviour of the staff and such behaviours eventually establish the "customer experience culture" of the organization. Rather than leaders becoming brand promoters, they now have to become story tellers in sharing narratives of brand resilience, commitment and its values to inspire the staff.

BELONGINGNESS

Today many youngsters in our country think that migration is the solution for everything. Many are obsessed with the migration syndrome. It is better to educate this generation that the grass is not as green, as one thinks, at the other side. Because of

Ensuring the digital presence of brands are responsive and available across various digital platforms to avail services at the ease of customers is a factor that needs to be looked into. Leaders should act with the norm that "prevention is better than cure."

this migration dilemma, the younger staff lack focus and loyalty to their work place. There is a need to ensure the brand message should remain consistent across all touchpoints. In the process, leaders must ensure that all staff at every "touch point" are demonstrating a behaviour with the feeling that they are the custodians of the brand promise. This is not possible until every staff member honestly considers himself as a serious stakeholder in their business entity. Turbulent times test the resilience of businesses.

However, with leaders at the forefront of adapting and championing exceptional customer service, businesses tend not only to survive but thrive. Leaders should recognize the importance of investing in their staff to create a great "customer experience" is a must, especially when the going gets tough. The affordability of training perhaps can be an issue during a crisis time, but leaders investing on their staff in "upskilling" and "reskilling" to perform the given task to create an outstanding "customer experience" should consider it as an investment than an expense. To uplift the morale, build resilience, give a new insight and focus for the purpose; through thoughtfully crafted inspirational "service educational programmes" will enhance their sense of belonging.

PROACTIVITY

Latest trends depict that instead of waiting for issues to arise, businesses now have to

anticipate challenges. Instead of waiting for a storm to pass, forward-thinking companies are now predicting and preparing for them. With predictive analytics, firms can foresee and mitigate potential service hiccups. In turbulent times, customers are increasingly sensitive in all aspects, where the margin for error is very narrow. Therefore, companies cannot afford mishaps. Proactively preparing teams to handle situations, ensuring they project brand values consistently and warmly should be given due emphasis.

According to a 2020 study by HubSpot, 93% of customers are likely to make repeat purchases with companies that offer excellent "customer service." Furthermore a PwC study found that 32% of customers would walk away from a brand they love after just one bad experience.

Empathy-driven approaches resonate more, especially in challenging periods. Furthermore, it is vital that customer service teams are empowered and equipped to handle heightened emotions, address concerns with sensitivity and exude warmth and

Authenticity is the currency of trust. In uncertain times, consumers seek pre-emptive support, transparency, honesty and authenticity.

Crisis times call for brands to show authenticity in all messages and ensuring campaigns resonate emotionally and offer genuine support. Moreover, understanding the beauty of a heartfelt conversation, the warmth of a humble apology, or the joy of a sincere compliment are irreplaceable.

understanding in every interaction. Ensuring the digital presence of brands are responsive and available across various digital platforms to avail services at the ease of customers is a factor that needs to be looked into. Leaders should act with the norm that "prevention is better than cure"

AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is the currency of trust. In uncertain times, consumers seek pre-emptive support, transparency, honesty, and authenticity. Today, customers are much more knowledgeable than ever before owing to their exposure to social media and other channels of communications. In a world which is full of "fake," people need "authenticity" than any other time. In service the new term that has evolved is "Genuine Customer Care" (GCC) that leads one's true care for the well-being of the customer. It is all about anticipating challenges and offering solutions before they escalate, demonstrating to its customers that the brand genuinely cares. Hence, PwC reported that a significant majority, with 82% of U.S. and 74% of non-U.S. consumers, are craving more for human interactions, not just automated responses.

Crisis times call for brands to show authenticity in all messages and ensuring campaigns resonate emotionally and offer genuine support. Moreover, understanding the beauty of a heartfelt conversation, the warmth of a humble apology, or the joy of a

sincere compliment are irreplaceable.

The fabric of customer loyalty is woven with threads of trust, empathy and understanding. Leaders have the responsibility of ensuring all promotional campaigns touch the heart. This means moving beyond sales pitches to messages that express genuine concern, solidarity and support.

Authentic leaders listen more than they speak. They integrate customer feedback into business strategies, ensuring the brand remains attuned to real-world emotions and needs.

SUMMARY

In a crisis time everybody must be concerned about "value creation" to the customer. Never waste any time, money and effort spent on non-value adding activities. Leaders must inspire their staff to be "value adding employees." Despite the fact that increasingly we speak about AI and ChatGPT support, yet human interaction makes a significant contribution in creating an "excellent customer experience." Whilst machines and AI undoubtedly play a role in enhancing "customer experience," they do not embody the essence of human interaction. The human element comes into play when an employee greets the customer with warmth, offers personalized recommendations and engages in meaningful conversations. These interpersonal connections elevate customer

experience, creating a sense of authenticity that machines, AI and ChatGPT cannot replicate.

Human interaction is rooted in empathy and understanding. Imagine situations where things unexpectedly go wrong, owing to over dependency on technology, where a customer in sheer desperation seeks support from a "Call Centre?" Without simply directing to a voice recorder, an employee's ability to empathize, provide personalized solutions along with "Genuine Customer Care" significantly enhances "customer experience."

Leaders of today must understand that; "Digitisation should not lead to standardisation and robotisation but customization and personalisation." Machines, AI and ChatGPT may provide solutions, but they lack the emotional intelligence that nurtures real empathy. It is important to accept that emotional resonance created through human interactions only can make a lasting difference.

Connections build beyond transactions foster enduring relationships. Such relationships establish loyalty, creating a sense of belonging that cannot be replicated by machines.

*** The author is an "inspirational" corporate trainer, keynote speaker and consultant towards service quality enhancement, "system study" and employee motivation to achieve higher productivity. Having held senior marketing positions in leading corporates, during the last two and half decades, he has conducted over 3,200 educational and inspirational workshops in over 800 leading public and private sector institutions in Sri Lanka and ten other countries with nearly 400,000 participants.**

Leaders of today must understand that; "Digitisation should not lead to standardisation and robotisation but customization and personalisation."

