



## PRESS INFORMATION

### THE CUSTOMER IS KING

Like it or not, the credit crunch is biting and, while it might be homeowners that are championed as the victims in the media, businesses need to ensure they have strategies in place to compete in a much tougher marketplace. In an ideal world, we'd all have a hero product that we could rely on to see us through the downturn but in this 'me too' age of global competition, we'd be foolish to rely solely on product differentiation. So what else is there? ***Richard Shaw, managing director of GreenBrook Electrical plc sets out his views.***

We could cut costs. Why not, it makes sense doesn't it? Well, yes and no. Of course wasting capital or assets (including people) is foolish during times of economic hardship...but no more foolish than it is at any other time. A well-run business will already be optimising its assets, spending its cash wisely and ensuring it has the best people in place to deliver for the customer. If all that's already in place, finding new ways to cut costs further simply risks reducing your investment in the customer experience – and an excellent customer experience is the biggest opportunity you have to differentiate.

In a sector that has been characterised by consolidation over the past few years, with many of the industry's specialist minnows being eaten up by giants keen to take a faster route to diversification, rationalising has often taken precedence over customer care. Certainly it's good business practice to look for synergies and de-duplicate roles when a takeover happens, but what about examining the success factors that made the acquired business a good buy in the first place? All too often the culture of service, relationship-building and quality that lies at the heart of small businesses is lost somewhere along the road to business integration. Now that times are tougher, perhaps its time to find those customer-focused cultures again and make quality rather than cutting costs the *raison d'être*.

So what does quality actually mean? Ask a dozen different management gurus and, no doubt, you'd get a dozen different answers. But, once again, that's part of the problem. There's not a credible business out there that isn't putting serious time effort – and money! – into examining its business processes and trying to devise ways to improve quality. The problem is that sometimes

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all the carefully crafted processes, intelligent strategies and integrated systems in the world are no substitute for what lies at the heart of a quality approach to business – quality people. No rocket science there then. Indeed, many line managers reading this will probably be thinking 'great, but where does he expect us to get these 'quality people' from?' The answer is, they're probably sitting opposite you right now, but have been so de-motivated by picking up new systems, adhering to square peg processes and fighting to achieve targets rather than customer satisfaction that they simply don't show it any more.

Of course, in a smaller company, where the head count is lower and managing individuals is easier, allowing people to follow their judgement instead of a process manual is more straightforward. However, all companies have something to learn from that. Customers respond to individuals and no customer wants to be told 'we can't do that because it's company policy', what they want to hear is 'because you're a valued customer I'll try x, y and z for you.' Businesses can only differentiate through customer service if that service is customer focused and allows individuals to respond to bespoke customer requirements. If you've got a one-size-fits all approach, it doesn't matter how slick or well-managed that approach to customer service, the customer feels like a number on a long list, not an organisation of genuine value to your company.

There is no secret formula to making the customer feel valued because they are all unique. That's the downside to the quality approach; it takes effort. It takes someone within your organisation to really understand the customer's organisation, what drives it, what obstacles it faces, what you can do to help. You may be able to add value by doing something as simple as issuing invoices on a specific day of the month, or they may want something more complex, like a change to product specification. Either way, if you don't know, you can't deliver, and you'll only find out by prioritising the customer experience.

A quality approach to customer satisfaction is no panacea for the economic slow down, but it is, perhaps, our best defence. For me, that's a message that needs to be heard not just at board or even managerial level, but throughout an organisation. People – at all levels – are nervous, nervous about the commercial climate and about their own job security. That can go one of two ways. Either they can be targeted with helping to deliver increased productivity and reducing costs. Or they can be challenged to step up to the mark for both the company and the customer and deliver excellence across the customer experience. No prizes for guessing which option I would choose.