

The power of effective consumer relations

In today's business environment, company success depends on understanding your customers and exceeding their demands for service. As products become less differentiated and demand growth slows, the profitability of a firm increasingly depends on its ability to find, expand and retain valuable customers.

National Brands Limited (NBL), proudly South African manufacturer of leading products, including Five Roses and Freshpak Teas, Bakers and Pyotts Biscuits, and Frisco and Ciro coffee, has perfected the art of consumer liaison by developing a strategy to monitor consumer perceptions, build customer loyalty, manage quality and market their products.

According to Tric Stone, Member of the Society of Consumer Care Professionals and NBL Consumer Liaison Manager, "Consumer care is all about managing consumer perception and we identify consumer complaints as a challenge and opportunity to exceed consumer expectations. Consumer liaison is NBL's biggest measure of non-conformity and our personalised, efficient and well-managed consumer liaison management ensures that all complaints and queries are dealt with in a timeous and courteous manner."

Customer relationship management is critical to the profitability and long-term success of companies across all industries. NBL's vigorous and practical consumer care programme affects not only marketing, but also sales and production of their brands. The effective consumer management has enabled NBL to take an active approach to customer care, help manage and monitor customer expectations and encourage a more productive relationship between the customer and the supplier.

NBL call centre, which is outsourced, handles roughly 1000 calls per month. Some calls can simply be enquiries and compliments, while others are complaints. Each call is answered by an operator (there is no voice activated system) within three rings and responded to within 48 hours.

This traditional and personalised consumer liaison management technique has allowed the company to identify and resolve problems, as well as create an extensive database.

According to Stone, "each call is logged on NBL's operating system. In order to understand the product non-conformance, we require product information and the consumer's personal details. With this information in hand, NBL can then take the necessary action."

Complaints are seen as a challenge and opportunity for NBL to correct and exceed expectations in order to develop and maintain brand loyalty. NBL aims to constantly improve the quality of consumer service as by stressing the importance of this significant consumer care function, NBL will derive benefits of growing greater long-term customer loyalty, as well as recognition for transparency.

NBL's consumer care has been so successful that it has shared its insights and ethos with both the Real Juice Company and Denny Mushrooms. The AVI group owns all three companies and the NBL customer care ethos has proved to be a valuable case study for consumer care within the manufacturing and FMCG industry.

Exceptional customer service is the only thing that will differentiate your business from your competition. In order for a business to grow, it is therefore essential to develop a strong customer-focused culture.

"It is far more cost-effective to build loyalty with existing customers than to keep replacing them. We value our customers and believe that consumer care is a vital part of our organisation. Our personal approach has enabled us to tackle all consumer issues effectively, creating positive company perceptions," concludes Stone.

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