



Jo Causon

CEO, the Institute of Customer Service



The Institute of Customer Service is the UK's independent, professional membership body for customer service.

With other 500 members across a wide range of sectors, including some of the country's biggest brands, its opinions and research carry considerable weight in debates about customer experience and what constitutes service excellence.

Jo Causon has been its CEO for seven years, coming to the role after a career in strategic marketing and holding director roles in both brand and business consulting.

This month Intelligence asked her what she sees as the biggest challenges facing UK organisations at a time when customer management is growing ever more essential to bottom line performance, and customer expectations are turning increasingly complex.

Why do you do what you do?

“Good question! Well, 79% of GDP in the UK is service driven and 70% of our workforce is employed in customer related roles, so customer service matters hugely to UK plc and it has a direct correlation to the bottom line performance of any organisation. I guess that's our mantra.

“We're here to help our members get better at doing this stuff... but it's an unusual relationship. We won't do everything our members want us to do. We're not a trade body so we're not there to lobby on their behalf. We're not here to make them look good. We're more like a 'critical friend'. Our role is to help organisations get better at customer service, because when they get better at it, UK plc gets better at it, and if UK plc gets better at it, we all have a better customer experience.

“One of our fantastic USPs is that we are completely independent; we do our research without an axe to grind. We have enough evidence to show there is a massive link between employee engagement and customer satisfaction. We know there is a link between customer satisfaction and loyalty, repeat purchase and intention to buy. We're convinced there is a solid link between customer service and ROI, and we're working to prove that great customer service over a sustained period will deliver it.

“But getting organisations to see customer experience not as a marketing tool, not the 'soft and fluffy' part of the business, but as an essential element in their business strategy can be a challenge.

What do you think are the biggest challenges currently facing organisations focusing on their customer service?

“Customers want everything to be both more simple and more complex.

“They want the simple, transactional stuff - the booking of tickets, for example - to be done easily, effortlessly. But at the other end of their relationship with a business they want a rich, complex, personalised experience. They want it both ways. While some organisations may say 'well, it's expecting too much', that is the reality of the world we live in.

The expectation of personalisation, and of a company's complete engagement with them and understanding of them, is only going to increase. Customers want more empathy and they want to be certain of having an intelligent conversation when they need it.

“But interestingly we believe people will pay for that, and that's a real prize.

“In our research we ask consumers questions around would you be willing to pay more for a better service. Traditionally at least 25% have said yes, in fact the percentage only interested in 'cheap' is surprisingly small. For many, if the service is good, and continues to be good, and they feel like they're getting value, then yes they're happy to pay.

“And really why should service be cheap? Behind that engaged, intelligent conversation customers want is knowledge, a lot of it, and knowledge is not cheap.

“Interestingly when you asked that questions five years ago people would say they were prepared to pay just to improve what was an awful service.

“Today service is generally much better, but I think people are still prepared to pay because they see the opportunities and benefits there could be for them if they invested a little more. At least I hope so because that would mean the things we are trying to do with the institute are having some resonance with organisations.

“But it doesn't always work that way.



Personalisation is going to become increasingly important, but there's a line between being personal and being presumptive



In conversation with...

How do you mean? What aren't companies seeing here?

"Big data may be held by organisations, but it's owned by you or I. It's our personal footprint and if we don't trust organisations we won't give it to them, or worse, we may give them incomplete data which will mean they'll have to start guessing and possibly get it horribly wrong.

"Consumers are much more savvy about the choices they have, the information they can access and their value to a business - as well as the power they hold when they express their opinions through social media.

"The future is about gaining trust, and before you can even begin to do that, you have to get the basics right - call handling, complaint handling, what you'd term the hygiene factors. That's absolutely essential.

"But then you have to be ready for the 'quirky' reservations customers might have. For example, I have a Boots card, which is perfectly fine, but I never use it to buy medicine because what will they do if they work out I'm obsessive about Fishermen's Friends...? That's just how human beings are, and you have to account for that.



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So where are businesses getting their approach to customer management - and customer data - wrong?

"At the moment some organisations are using Big Data and behavioural science to try to sell, but consumers are very smart now, we know exactly when we're being sold to.

However, if you use that information to know me better, I'm more likely to buy, and that's what's shifted, that degree of subtlety.

"As I said, personalisation is going to become increasingly important, but there's a line between being personal and being presumptive.

For example, if you contact me, do you call me Jo? Do you write to me formally? How do I like to be addressed? Just because you hold

data on me doesn't mean you know the answer to that question. How about just asking? It's a small detail but when was the last time you were actually asked by an organisation how you would like to be addressed?

"How organisations ask and then how they explain why they're asking will shape much of our response as customers to requests for our data.

"It's like buying something in an airport and being asked for your boarding card. Why? "Oh, we need it." No you don't. You don't need it at all. You want it because it has useful marketing information about me.

"We're not stupid. It's that lack of transparency that makes us suspicious.

"And if I do give you my data, you'd sure better do something positive with it and improve my experience because if I still get that same, automated "your business is important to us" message, I'll know I've wasted my time. You won't get my data again.

Where do you think UK businesses are getting it right?

"If you look at the top performance in terms of the UK CSI, I think there's a lot we can be proud of. A number of organisations are consistently up there.

"We did a bit of research against Europe and the UK scored higher than any other European country in the survey for customer service, so while we can be harsh on ourselves, there are some things we are doing really well. You see that in some of those top-performing organisations - a real desire to connect and to do it properly.

And what personally drives you crazy about customer service?

"Hmm... I suppose you can say it comes down to organisations failing to see the difference between transactional and empathetic. If I'm booking tickets online I want that to be transactional, really simple. But if I'm buying a dress in a shop and ask the assistant for advice, I don't want them to say, "you look wonderful dahling..." when I know it makes me look ten stone heavier!



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And what about the future?

"I would implore organisations to be brave, and really think about the service agenda as a way of differentiating themselves on the world stage. That is a huge opportunity.

Also they need to think about the entire customer journey. Often businesses are so fixated on their own customer journey they forget the customer has already made a journey to reach their front door, and

will make another one on leaving.

"So I'd say the future is about collaboration and connectiveness; making that whole end-to-end experience work, not just the one within your own organisation. That's going to require some different thinking from businesses and they'll need to be much more externally sighted to understand that.

"We are heading towards an experience led world, so you really need to understand exactly what experience I want - and the whole experience too - if you're going to succeed in that future. "

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