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## BPIR Management Brief : Vol 2 Issue 8 - Customer Support and Service

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Welcome to Vol 2 Issue 8 of the BPIR.com Management Brief that provides short, easily digestible research summaries based on specific topics or tools. Summaries include comments from experts, case examples, and survey analyses. Topics for the briefs are based on those submitted as requests through our members' Research Request Service. Read and absorb, then pass on to your staff/colleagues to do the same.

### **Customer support and service - definition**

Customer support and service (CSS) involves a range of after-sales activities which relate to the manner in which products and services are delivered, bundled, explained, billed, installed, repaired, renewed, and potentially redesigned.

### **The stage**

Customer Support and Service (CSS) is founded upon a customer focused, or customer-centric, business philosophy. Ongoing company profitability is related to how customers perceive the levels of support and service offered by an organisation. It has been predicted that the prioritisation of CSS investments will be a major component relating to organisational growth over the next few years.

The economics relating to the provision of CSS i.e. the balancing of levels of service against the cost of provision is a matter of key importance requiring company-wide coordination along with the integration of information and communications systems.

## Expert Opinion

### *What is Customer Service and Support (CSS)?*

The underlying philosophy of an organisation in regard to its customers, along with the nature its business, have an influence on the type of customer support and service provided. CSS involves the management of longer-term customer relationships and is closely related to the management of product life cycles. CSS may involve back-up services for maintaining productivity in the event of failures and the provision of replacement parts, critical spares, service contracts, and service level agreements. In this regard Help Desks for information, assistance, and fault management are commonly a key component associated with customer support and service.

The quality of after sales support and the services provided by an organisation can have a significant bearing upon:

- a) The acquisition of customers due to purchasing decisions often involving comparisons of the CSS offerings that may be available from various vendors.
- b) Business growth, in particular growth that is related to enjoying a good CSS reputation, or strong CSS branding association.
- c) Customer loyalty which can be built up through experiencing superior customer support and service.

CSS processes need to be well planned and managed to maximise the ensuing benefits of customer acquisition, growth, and loyalty. Successful CSS systems are closely related to an organisation's culture, policies, and customer focus.

Russ Westcott (2002), president of consulting firm Westcott & Associates states that to maintain a customer focus involves focusing every person and every process in the organisation on customers (both internal and external) in a balanced way, and that to achieve such a customer focus all company actions must be ethically, economically, and socially sound. Westcott presents Table 1 below as a way of viewing the status of customers within an organisation

Table 1 - Levels of customer satisfaction

| Level | Is your customer?    | Then your customer:                                |
|-------|----------------------|--|
| 1     | Dissatisfied         | Has probably departed forever                      |
| 2     | Marginally satisfied | Is casual (any supplier will do)                   |
| 3     | Basically satisfied  | Is borderline, uncommitted                         |
| 4     | Delighted            | Is a return customer, (retained)                   |
| 5     | A committed advocate | Is loyal, appreciates what you do and tells others |

### *Customer Experience Management (CEM)*

Customer Experience Management (CEM) systems are designed to discover what customers expect from their suppliers. CEMs aim to meet discovered customer needs, and to guard against customer defections. Oscar Alban,

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principal market consultant for Witness Systems, (2002) states that as organisations work in highly competitive markets they are seeking to fine-tune business performance management practices in the desire to achieve their strategic goals. And one of the key goals is the provision of optimum customer service levels. Alban writes that, "Providing high-calibre customer experiences remains one of the top priorities for organisations today and to have a truly successful CRM strategy, the front-office contact centre must be bridged to the back-office departments that support the customer experience. Industry experts fully support this, predicting that by 2007 enterprises that have prioritised investments in customer service and support optimisation will grow their market share as much as 35 percent over the industry average."

John Wookey (2003) senior vice president, applications development, of Oracle Corporation writes that gaining a deeper understanding of customer needs, interests, and concerns makes good business sense. Basic survival in competitive markets may depend on keeping existing customers satisfied, and in identifying cross-sell and up sell opportunities. The optimum solution for CSS is to employ a single customer model across an enterprise and to use collaborative CRM technologies which can collect and synchronize data from multiple knowledge sources. System-wide analytics then become possible and can provide information ranging from simple queries through to customer lifetime value assessments. The use of customer segmentation and profiling tools can enable service managers to create multiple levels of service and to factor in a customer's relative value. This allows more profitable or influential customers to be treated in line with their value to the organisation. Customer service and support can be greatly improved with the application of collaborative CRM systems e.g. through the provision of automated reporting throughout organisations, and by the provision of improved scheduling of services and for staff visits.

### *Help Desks*

Increasingly, organisations are implementing customer Help Desks in order to provide information, assistance, and fault management over the telephone. These are often considered a more cost effective method than having multiple store or contact points in a customer's local area. The following factors have an important bearing on the quality of the customer service and support offered by help desk personnel:

- Accessibility
- Experience, and
- The information base available

Fault handling services can be enhanced through the use of tracking systems and fault history databases. In addition remote diagnostics and remote control software enable collaborative services to be provided as part of the help desk service. Jason Romney (2004) CEO of a Sydney software technology company gives the following advice concerning running an effective help desk:

- 1) Clearly define service level agreements (SLAs) to ensure that they incorporate response and resolution time commitments based on the problem severity. Customer input should be sought to determine the appropriateness of these SLAs. Performance results should be regularly published to show how well the help desk is performing and to acknowledge the success of the team.

- 2) Implement help desk automation software for tracking customer jobs.
- 3) Use remote management tools.
- 4) Employ integrated Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) reference lists and knowledge management systems.

### *Web-Based Customer Service*

Web-based customer service and support practices are also on the increase, and offer advantages to both customers, in terms of convenience and rapid service, and to business owners in terms of cost savings. Michael Lough (2004), CEO of LiveWire Logic Inc., and Dr. James Lester, co-founder and chief scientist, believe that it is beneficial to offer multiple channels of support to customers, and that they should be given a choice concerning which channel they use. It is also important that the information contained in these various channels is coordinated, and that all front line staff are privy to the information offered on the organisation's web sites, knowledge management systems, or self-service systems.

Many organisations face the challenge of cutting costs to remain competitive while at the same time enhancing their customer services and improving marketing capabilities. Curt Champion (2003), a senior director at Convergys Corporation relates how web-based self-care can help meet these conflicting requirements. Web self-care is generally less expensive than live agent support, it can help to improve agent productivity, and it is also a useful platform for marketing. Forrester Research was cited in a report showing that some 66 percent of surveyed firms said they have either implemented a web self-care program, are rolling one out, or are running one in the pilot stage. Multiple channels are recommended as being the most appropriate means of providing self service CSS e.g.

- Web self-care can accommodate complex information
- Simpler tasks can be efficiently handled over the telephone through interactive voice response (IVR) systems.
- For complex tasks which required interaction web collaboration may be appropriate. Web chat can be used to interact with customer service representatives (CSRs), and they can perhaps take control of the consumer's web browser or push enhanced content to complete a customer's request. The service level provided is high however, the cost to the company can be less than one-on-one telephone connections.

Web self-care needs to be marketed just like any other product. The reasons why a customer would want to return should be understood. By offering 'Web only' special pricing customers can be attracted to use this mechanism. Organisations need to ensure that all products and services are covered on the Web site. The first visit by a customer to a self-care Web site will influence their desire to return, and for this reason the services need to be easy to use, understandable and focused on the user experience. Forrester Research is cited as providing the following comparative costs for self-care transactions:

- Web self-care averages US\$1.17 per transaction
- E-mail US\$9.99
- Chat US\$7.80, and
- Message boards US\$4.57

### *Virtual Call Centres*

Achieving customer service excellence whilst minimising costs is a continuing challenge for businesses. The integration of the various services offered has become possible through the use of virtual call centres. These call centres are based on the IP (Internet Protocol) technology which is readily available and can be implemented for global availability. Steve Kaish (2004), CosmoCom's vice president of sales, Americas and Japan, states that IP-based virtual call centres represent a vehicle which is well placed to address common organisation needs, i.e. to:

- 1) Move operations offshore wherever possible
- 2) Integrate multiple stand-alone operations into a single entity
- 3) Provide universal customer access via telephone, e-mail, and Internet via less costly and more convenient interaction channels, while preserving quality and consistency across all.

Staffing resources may be optimised and experts can be made available to any caller by using location-independent skills-based routing. Virtualisation is more cost-effective and easier to justify with IP-based architecture than with any other technology. Because standard personal computer equipment may be used from multiple locations, including their home, agents may be located almost anywhere in the world. These disparate parts of the virtual call centres may be managed as a single system image. Managers are able to retain complete operational visibility and control across the globe via Web-based administrative and reporting tools. All interactions with the organisation can be tracked in a unified way, enabling all incoming channels to be tracked and reported on using the same methodology. These tools can improve efficiency and control, increase agent productivity, and enhance customer satisfaction

### *Remote Control Tools*

Eric Jensen (2004), GoToAssist product marketing manager writes that organisations are finding remote support technologies more productive and easier to use than traditional phone and e-mail support methods when resolving technical support incidents. Remote support tools fall into the following broad categories:

- Remote control tools that provide the ability for a distant technical support representative to access and control an end user's device for technical problem diagnosis and troubleshooting,
- Remote monitoring and management tools that enable an application or infrastructure vendor to receive problem alarms and initiate action without end user intervention, and
- Remote diagnostics which enable a technical support representative to chat with an end user, run diagnostics, and obtain a report.

The primary drivers for adopting remote support systems have been to improve customer satisfaction whilst achieving a positive return on investment (ROI).

### *Multi-channel Support Services*

Many customers now expect multiple levels of service provided via multiple channels to meet their various needs for support. This includes:

- Telephone support,

- Web based alternatives,
- e-Mail,
- Web chat,
- Search utilities,
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) lists, and
- Automated agents (interactive voice response technology systems which model live agents.)

By offering a wide breadth of customer service and support options it was believed that customer retention and satisfaction would improve, and that this would impact on revenue and repeat business. An objective of multi-channel CSS is to serve customers' needs as efficiently as possible at the lowest cost. A key to ensuring the effectiveness of this strategy is to integrate self-service solutions with other options. With multi-channel CSS a customer's query may be escalated, along with previous contact information, to the most appropriate level.

### *CSS Performance Measurement*

Techniques that may be used to measure CSS performance include the following:

1. Customer Complaint information provides valuable data about customer requirements, opinions, and viewpoints. This information can be used to better manage customer interactions, adapt products and services, and modify/better control specific processes.

Dr Robert Ramsey (2003) writes that customer complaint handling is an important aspect of CSS, and that responding to serious complaints can be the quickest, easiest way to pinpoint products, services, systems, or employees who are not operating as intended. By tracking the effectiveness of complaint handling systems a reality check of an organisation's response times and capacity to correct mistakes can be gauged. Complaints offer an opportunity to find weak links that otherwise would have gone unnoticed until perhaps a serious problem redeveloped. Usually complaining customers are valued messengers.

2. Servqual, which is a measurement scale employing five dimensions i.e. reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy to assess customer perceptions of service.
3. Customer Satisfaction Index which is an aggregate of various customer satisfaction measures and can provide a comparative measure between organisations.
4. Customer Expectation Scorecards which provide a means of measuring how well an organisation meets its customers' key requirements.
5. Mystery Shopper Surveys which are used to measure employees selling techniques and the quality of service and support offered to customers.
7. Service Level Agreements (or a performance agreement) between a service or product provider and a customer.

## Survey and Research Data

### *Customer Complaints Resolution Process needs to be fast and personal*

The 2000 National Complaints Culture Survey in the UK found that the number of people who complain all or most of the time has increased to 44%. People who don't complain cited their reasons as 'lack of time' and 'too much trouble'. However, when they do complain they want a fast initial response and a very fast resolution. They also desire to deal with a person rather than any form of electronic machine, with 73% preferring the personal touch, either by phone or face-to-face. (Anonymous, 2000b)

### *Customer support and service (CSS) expectations*

A 2004 customer service survey which had 1001 respondents revealed that customer service throughout the UK was well below expected standards in the telecommunications, banking, and retail sectors. The results showed:

1. 80% of UK consumers would put up with only one negative experience before taking their business somewhere else;
2. 75% said they would argue their case and get angry in the face of bad customer service;
3. More than 80% said they had experienced bad customer service recently;
4. Over 50% would rather visit their in-laws or drive round the M25 than deal with current levels of customer service;
5. 90% cited long waiting times as their greatest customer service annoyance;
6. Only 5% said the offer of free goods/services following poor service was considered important;
7. More than 80% said they would tell friends and family about a poor customer service experience;
8. 85% felt that customer service was far superior abroad;
9. More than 75% preferred their query to be handled by a mature woman.

(Anonymous, 2004)

### *CSS On-line and Off-line service linkages*

In a June 2002 Forrester Research document, which pertained to customer service matters, executives from 25 financial institutions reported the following:

- 72% of respondents were not able to permit customers to continue filling out applications off-line which they had begun on-line.
- 76% reported that when customers called their call centres for help with trading stock or paying bills from their web-sites, agents couldn't view the same screens as the on-line customers. Nor could they guide them through making the trades or payments.
- 52% reported that customer contact information changed on the web was not necessarily reflected in all of the customers' company accounts.

Years of internet experience reportedly led to greater numbers of customers working on-line i.e. those with 1 to 3 years experience worked mainly off-line. For those with 5 years experience:

- 33% used both on and off-line services

- 35% worked exclusively on-line
- 32% worked exclusively off-line  
(Fleischer, 2003)

### *CSS Self-Service growth potential*

Forester Research reported that: 62 percent of Fortune 1000 companies treat self-service as their most important CRM initiative and predicted that on-line and self service applications would grow by 10 percent reaching some \$1.1 billion in CRM spending in 2008. Natural language based self-service technology was expected to grow annually at 12 percent and reach \$9.2 billion in 2008. The driving force behind these initiatives was the desire to maintain quality services whilst keeping CSS costs at reasonable levels (Lough & Lester, 2004)

### *Customer support and service (CSS) - self service not the most popular option*

In a study by Jupiter Research involving 2,734 US consumers and concerning customer support self-services, the following online customer services were used by respondents for recent inquiries:

- Sent e-mail (50%);
- Made a phone call (22%);
- Used static FAQ list (13%);
- Used searchable self-service (8%);
- Used text based chat (3%);
- Referred to support community (1%);
- Not sure (3%).

80% of consumers reported using searchable self-service during the previous 6 months, however just 8% indicated this as the first support option used for their most recent inquiries and 54% reported that self-service searches returned too many results to be useful. Jupiter projected that on-line service contacts would grow by 28% over a 12 month period. Jupiter's model revealed that the availability of self-service search functions could reduce support contact volumes by some 10%, and this had the effect of delaying the need to increase call centre headcounts. (Daniels, 2003)

### *Customer Complaint Information not being used to improve organisational performance*

A benchmarking survey by Swallow Information Systems of 28 organisations in the business-to-consumer marketplace found that while 93% of the organisations recorded customer data, only a third used their customers' opinions to improve organisational practices. In addition, while 89% used the Internet as a prime method for contacting customers, most had no procedure for resolving online complaints and enquiries. At least one quarter of these organisations have no dedicated customer service policy at all. (Anonymous, 2000a)

### *Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are important for ongoing customer satisfaction*

A July 2002 survey of 151 customers of data service providers (SP) carried out by Open Group, a consortium of US companies revealed that of the respondents:

- 75% would not subscribe to certain services without an SLA;

- 91% reported that SLAs were 'important' for continuing satisfaction with their SPs;
  - 18% of SLAs for some services were met only 'sometimes';
  - 60% of respondents had internal SLAs with the IT department;
  - More than 40 percent (particularly finance and health care-related organisations) offered SLAs to outside parties;
  - Only 26 percent could monitor conformance to SLAs in real-time;
  - 58% modify SLA parameters at least once a year;
  - Should SLAs not be met respondents indicated that:
    - 61% would terminate the contract;
    - 54% wanted penalties paid;
    - 44% wanted fees waived.
- (Korostoff, 2002)

## Example cases:

Learn valuable lessons from these organisations:

### **Bank of America Corporation**



#### *Customer Support and Service (CSS) Receives Positive Feedback*

In a nationwide evaluation the bank learned that some 50% of its customers at over 500 of its sites were seniors. A team was established to investigate how to meet the particular needs of this market. It was desired to create new branch environments that were safe and welcoming and addressed special needs of aging customers. Three types of trials were carried out at selected sites i.e.:

1. Staff training in selling to seniors, and understanding the physical challenges faced by elderly customers;
2. Basic branch office changes e.g. painting, carpeting, rearranging furniture, and seated queuing arrangements;
3. Major environmental changes reflecting the fact that bank visits often served as a 'social outlet' for seniors.

As a result of the trials positive feedback was received both from customers and staff, and training was proposed throughout the Bank of America network. (Stewart, 2004)

### **Fleet Enterprise Services USA**



#### *Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in a Call Centre*

Enterprise Fleet Services, USA, a division of Enterprise Rent-A-Car, provides vehicles on lease to companies that lease from 15 to 125 cars and trucks at a time. To better service its 11,000 customers and its network of 65,000 affiliated service centres, Enterprise set up a call centre designed to meet the demands of providing managed vehicle care for their clients and handle 22,000 calls per month mainly from repair shops and service centres related to vehicle maintenance. To improve service and provide the level of expertise needed to talk intelligently to customers in selling a comprehensive maintenance plan,

and to repair shops who serviced the vehicles, the enterprise:

1. Employed 33 certified auto mechanics as CSRs who knew how to gauge whether a repair shop offered the best price and most appropriate service for a particular vehicle;
2. Trained the technicians in providing phone-based customer service;
3. Gave the technicians the authority to negotiate price and authorise payment;
4. Passed non-technical calls to a group of five non-mechanic CSRs, so technicians could spend more of their time on the intensive negotiating calls;
5. When a repair bill was reduced due to a CSR's effective cost of repair management it was factored into the CSRs performance;
6. Used customer interactions as opportunities to freshen and/or improve the relationship with the customer;
7. Used typical call centre industry metrics to measure performance such as hold times and the percentage of calls answered;
8. Recorded an improvement in satisfaction scores and a reduction in the average wait time from 4.5 minutes to less than one minute for calls on hold. (Dawson & O'Herron, 2003)

### Ben Netherlands BV



#### *Call Centres - Superior Customer Service Contributes to Rapid Growth*

Ben Netherlands BV, GSM retailer, signed on 1.2 million cellular customers to become Holland's third largest operator in terms of revenues. Contributing to these results was the provision of superior customer service and work processes i.e.:

- The key metric for the Billing process was 100% accuracy (after service activation a high percentage of calls related to billing enquiries, hence by minimising these impact on accelerating customer acquisition was greatly reduced);
- Calls for routine information were outsourced and more complex calls sent to qualified internal representatives;
- Rather than minimising call times CSRs were encouraged to resolve customer needs on the first call;
- CSRs/managers were empowered to find alternative solutions for customers leading to increased job satisfaction;
- CSRs had seven qualification levels and corresponding pay scales. Absenteeism was 30% below the national average and staff attrition rate was 2% per month, compared to a 7% national average. (Hoffman, 2002)

### Principal Financial Group



#### *Customer support and service - talking points developed*

In a desire to improve customer services, whilst adding to the organisation's bottom line, Principal Financial Group (PFG) developed enhanced training programmes for its

call centre agents. When PFG's retirement business began to lose customers, experienced call centre agents were seconded to help the marketing group develop talking points designed to assuage participant's concerns about their retirement funds. PGF agents, many of whom had college degrees and financial experience, were well placed to assist. The agents also helped to research competitor behaviour. While traditional call centre metrics, e.g. schedules and call monitoring scores continued to be measured, PGF also placed an emphasis upon an agent's ability to improve the profitability of the company. Gift certificates were awarded to agents that helped retain business with PGF enjoying a 65% improvement in retirement plan rollover compared to the previous year. (Fleischer, 2003)

### Gulf Bank, Kuwait



#### *Service measured using a customer scorecard.*

Gulf Bank developed a customer scorecard for reporting service quality and productivity. The scorecard involved a suite of performance reports designed to drive growth in customer acquisition/retention and profits through improved service delivery and efficiency. The following scorecard measures were derived from face to face customer interviews:

- 1) Excellent Staff (efficiency, knowledge, politeness, and confidentiality)
- 2) Excellent Operations (accuracy, availability, and complaint handling)
- 3) Convenience (location, parking, waiting times, tidiness, remote banking availability)
- 4) Competitive Costs (lowest charges for loans, overdrafts, service fees, commissions and highest interest on deposits)
- 5) Excellent reputation and corporate Image.

Scorecard results were reported weekly and resulted in various improvement initiatives. Mystery shoppers were also used to measure the service quality of the bank and of its competitors. Through understanding service quality the bank was able resolve the sometimes conflicting demands of service excellence and economy of operation. (Jones, 2004)

## Measure and Evaluate Customer Support and Service

In order to fully evaluate the impact of customer support and service initiatives it is necessary to undertake, where possible, a quantitative assessment of their impact and assign calculable values. The following provide (in addition to the comments under *CSS Performance Measurement* on page 4) some simple ideas on how customer support and service can be assessed:

**Service Level Agreement (SLA) - Achievement:** e.g. % of occasions the supplier organisation adheres to the SLA in a given period or, average cost of penalties or fines for SLA non-achievement. Adherence to the SLA is a key measure of a supplier's ability to deliver the minimum required service to the customer.

**Service Level Agreement (SLA) - Number of:** e.g. % of suppliers with whom SLA's are used. This measure provides an indication of the level of use of SLA's through which management of the supplier relationship and performance is achieved.

**Quality of service (pre & post sales):** e.g. Customer perception of quality of service (survey). A component of overall service quality, this measure assesses the quality of service as perceived by the customer.

**Employees - Direct/support ratio:** e.g. Number of direct staff : number of support staff or, cost of direct staff : cost of support staff. This measure provides a comparison of the number of direct staff to support staff and can reflect on both the efficiency of the organisation and its level of customer focus. It assesses the proportion of the organisation's employees that work directly on delivering the product or service to the customer.

**Customer satisfaction:** e.g. Quantified customer satisfaction survey results. This is a measure of the level of customers' satisfaction with the service provided.

**Customer service management focus:** e.g. Frequency of reassessment of issues within Customer Service Management. This measure provides an indication of the effectiveness of Customer Service Management within an organisation. This can be useful if included when surveying likely Benchmarking partners.

**Cycle time - Service (request):** e.g. Time taken from customer call or request for service repairs to the system or product back up and running. This provides a measure of customer down-time - a key indicator of service quality.

**Training - Customer care:** e.g. % customer service personnel trained in customer care techniques, or % of all customer contact personnel trained in customer care techniques, or number of personnel trained in customer care techniques. This measure provides an indication of customer care training that has been completed within the organisation.

**Call-Centre - Call wait length:** e.g. Average time customers wait on hold before being attended to. This data provides a measure of the effectiveness of the call centre in providing fast and efficient service.

**Call-Centre - Response time performance :** e.g. % of calls answered within response target level (such as the number of rings or time in seconds before the call is answered). This provides a measure of the employee's success in meeting targets for call answering response times. This measure can influence customer satisfaction and inquiry conversion.

**Call-Centre - Call length:** e.g. Average total time online to satisfy customer's inquiry/complaint/transaction. This data provides a measure of the effectiveness of the call centre in providing fast and efficient service.

**Lead time - Service provider:** e.g. Time period taken from customer order for service to when service is provided and fully functional (may be measured in minutes, hours, days, weeks). This is a measure of service provider related lead-time. This measure represents overall lead time from customer order to completion of order.

**Lead time - Product delivery:** e.g. Elapsed time from receipt of customer order to product and / or service completion / delivery. A measure of lead-time that is appropriate to organisations whose final product typically includes design and other services in addition to the tangible end product (eg construction projects).

#### DIFOTIS

A measure of the % of the product or service that is delivered to customers in-full, on-time, and in-spec. A commonly used measure that is often used to compare, or benchmark, against competitors or organisations with comparable issues or requirements..

**Employee empowerment - Customer pacification:** e.g. % customers' complaints or claims that are satisfactorily closed-out by frontline customer contact staff. This measure provides an indication of the level of the effectiveness of employee empowerment at pacifying early, customers experiencing dissatisfaction with a product or service delivered by the organisation. It is important to pacify these customers as soon as possible, as this can increase the chances of transforming a dissatisfied customer into a satisfied one.

## Summary

Customer Support and Service (CSS) is related to the overall culture or philosophy of an organisation, and this has a bearing upon company image and branding. A good CSS reputation can foster growth through the acquisition and retention of customers. The desire to become more customer-centric has led to a strong under-pinning of CSS implementations by organisations. The provision of excellent CSS by businesses whilst also remaining competitive requires continual fine tuning as organisations seek to meet the needs of their customers and to balance these needs against sound economics.

The scope of CSS stretches from the delivery of products through to repairs, maintenance, upgrades, and finally the provision of new products. CSS is defined by the following activities:

- The ongoing relationship between vendors and buyers in association with products and services that have been provided
- Replacement parts, critical spares, repairs, service contracts, service level agreements.
- Back up services, working collaboratively, optimising productivity, cooperation
- Product enhancements and improvements, updates and upgrades
- Advice, Information, documentation (hard copy and Web based)
- Help Desks and the availability of service, experience, skills, and technology
- Collaborative CRM e.g. web based chat, applications sharing, desktop sharing, file transfer and collaborative browsing
- Faults, history, tracking, communications, call backs, remote diagnostics, and remote control software

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) developments have made it possible to provide multiple levels of CSS and to use multiple delivery channels. This has facilitated the ability to balance customer support requirements against competitive realities. The appropriate

levels of service can be provided, and service levels may be escalated to meet the current needs of a customer. ICT systems can be integrated enabling information to be shared across organisations with customer records travelling as issues are escalated. CSS systems which integrate front and back office functions can lead to optimal staffing levels along with wider access to customer services. Improved scheduling of work, better fault response performance, along with remote diagnostics and testing can also be provided.

#### Note

Techniques and case studies mentioned or summarised in this article can be found in more detail via the BPIR.com along with the full text of most of the articles and reports in the reference list below.

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Previous issues of the Management Brief:

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