



Organizational strategies for filling the customer can-do/must-do gap

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Abstract Service leaders have learned that it is not enough to attract customers who are ready and willing to experience what their organizations have to offer; they must also attract customers who are able to perform important roles in co-producing a successful service experience. This recognition has led to increasing interest regarding how organizations should manage these quasi-employees to ensure everything that must be done actually *is* done. Leading service organizations embrace this responsibility and have developed strategies to identify and accommodate variations in their targeted customers' capabilities. They know that client satisfaction depends upon the organization making up for deficiencies between what the customer must do to have a great service experience and what the customer actually can do. Surprisingly, there has been little systematic investigation into how organizations create and execute strategies to ensure that these deficiency gaps are filled. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that organizations that have developed systems and procedures to fill these gaps are likelier to satisfy their customers and achieve higher levels of repeat business than firms that have not. This article offers strategies for organizations that commit to bridging the customer can-do/must-do gap and thereby ensuring their customers have a successful service experience.

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1. Customers bring resources and capabilities. . .but not always

When Disney first introduced the FASTPASS reservation system to its theme parks, it anticipated that

many of its guests would need training in order to obtain the value of this innovation. As such, Disney made sure cast members were visible and available near FASTPASS equipment to provide user guidance. Likewise, when United Healthcare gains a new customer under its AARP Healthcare Plan, it not only sends a booklet containing a clear explanation of its services but also calls each new enrollee to ensure that the customer understands the plan and how to use it. Both examples reflect corporate/firm

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recognition of a gap between what customers could/can do and what they must do to obtain the expected value from the service experience.

Disney and United Healthcare, like other successful service organizations, have developed strategies for a successful service experience that acknowledge and account for gaps that may exist between the capabilities and resources required of the customer and the capabilities and resources the customer actually brings to the table. There is no such thing as an average customer or typical service experience to these organizations; rather, customer variability is embraced. When they design their service experiences and train their employees, these organizations take the important next step of planning for the inevitable variations customers bring to the service experience. In short, they have accepted responsibility for filling any gaps that may occur between what capabilities and resources are required to obtain a satisfying customer experience and what their targeted customers actually bring to the service. This requires a careful assessment of targeted customers' capabilities and a plan to accommodate the inevitable differences.

Because service leaders recognize that their customers will vary in the human and physical resources they bring as quasi-employees, these leaders have created systems and procedures to account and compensate for the variations. They have learned that while their quasi-employee customers have many capabilities in common, each customer is unique. Service leaders therefore spend time and money to ensure they have done everything possible to create a can-do/must-do fit between their organization and each customer within their targeted market. More importantly, service leaders realize that when there is a gap between what a customer can do and what that customer must do, the service leader should have a strategy in place to fill that gap. They know that without preparation—anticipating and designing systems, training employees, and creating procedures—their organization will risk losing customers. This is not an easy decision, as it requires organizations to carefully balance revenues that would be lost from failing customers, especially those in their target markets, against the costs of allocating resources required to fill gaps.

The purpose of this article is to show how successful service organizations have planned for and filled customer can-do/must-do gaps. We use the lessons they learned to develop a five-step framework designed to ensure that all the resources and capabilities required to create a successful service experience are provided. We suggest that in a customer-centric marketplace, having strategies in

place that successfully fill these gaps enables organizations to gain a competitive advantage in co-creating value with their customers.

2. Finding and filling the customer can-do/must-do gap

To ensure that can-do/must-do gaps are filled, organizations need to understand the various roles customers play, the activities they perform in those roles, and all the resources and capabilities required to perform those activities. Organizations also need to carefully review the processes that integrate customers' can-do resources and capabilities with those provided by the organization, to ensure the must-dos are accounted for in co-creating value. The concept of organizations co-creating value with customers has evolved from earlier work on co-production roles customers have played or could play in their service experiences (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Although the roles that customers play have been relatively well addressed in the literature, how the organization best facilitates customer performance in those roles is not well understood (Ford & Dickson, 2012; Ford & Heaton, 2001; Ford, Sturman, & Heaton, 2012). Furthermore, while there has been interest in defining the role of customers co-creating value with firms (e.g., McColl-Kennedy, Vargo, Dagger, Sweeney, & van Kasteren, 2012), there has been surprisingly little investigation into the nature and types of human and physical resources that the organization must provide to compensate for any gaps between the resources and capabilities the customer brings and what is actually required for a successful service experience.

2.1. Combined knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs)

Organizations and customers participate at varying degrees to create a service experience. We use the term *combined KSAs* to describe any variation of participation between an organization and its customer that includes all the physical and human resources and capabilities required to create a successful service experience. We define customer KSAs broadly to include not only the familiar task-related knowledge, skills, and abilities, but also factors unique to each customer, such as financial and physical resources, personality, social capital, intelligence, and life experiences in general. These KSAs represent a customer's stock of resources and capabilities or what a customer can do, but may not be sufficient to account for all that the customer must

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