



“Customer Relationship Management” – dead or alive?

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Customer Relationship Management is nothing new. Maybe you know it as “customer-focused service.” Chances are you use some form of CRM technology – whether bought, built, or hosted – along with quality monitoring and voice-of-the-customer programs to promote your focus on the customer. Regardless of what you call it, pretty much everyone believes in the concept. But do you *really* manage relationships and focus on the customer in your center and your company?

I ask the question because four recent experiences make me think we have fallen short. Each instance involved a Fortune 50 company with an immensely recognizable brand. Product troubles, billing and technical problems *they* created, and problems they didn’t resolve on the first, second, or third contact raised costs, frustrated the customer, and increased the risk of defection. They’re lucky I’m writing an industry-focused article without their names rather than a pointed rant on a public web site. [*Some of these are really amazing stories!*] And by the way, in each case, the “customer” had a long-standing “relationship” with the company worth hundreds or thousands of dollars a year. My lifetime value to them? Priceless. Yet this seems to go unnoticed and unacknowledged. It certainly didn’t seem to influence the service experience.

As call center professionals, our friends are quick to share their poor customer service stories. They’ve got a legitimate beef – service often stinks. Check out CCPact – <http://www.ccpect.com> – and see what you think. Through a grass roots effort, they’re trying to create a pact between companies and customers to get it right. I love the idea – we need to promote the positive potential of our industry! But we have to get it right on the company side *first* to enable the customer to come to the interaction with a positive attitude and a willingness to build and sustain a relationship.

So what should you do? Become an advocate of true CRM – not just the technology, but the concept. I’m going to pick up on my last *From the Trenches* theme to focus on processes, especially end-to-end. Most of the problems I experienced were cross-departmental issues, and the call center takes the hit, both in cost and customer perception. Push a theme across your organization: *Consider the customer first*. Ideally this exercise is a top down effort, but start grass roots if you must. Use recordings, letters, and the cases where customers resort to the Web 2.0 approach to broadcast their frustration to millions of their closest friends. Use these tools to build awareness across the enterprise. Ensure executives from other areas sit with representatives. Start with awareness and then begin to tackle the changes needed to ensure customer relationship management is alive and well.