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Contact Center Culture is Competitive Advantage For These Online Electronics Retailers

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In the age of agile budget management and Prime shipping speeds at matched prices, it's sometimes easy to lose sight of the most basic tenet of customer service: the customer. As self-service platforms gain prominence and filter out simpler customer concerns, the emotionally intelligent, knowledgeable agent increases the likelihood of a positive interaction and the "bonus" of this additional, value-added solution has proven to create loyalty in competitive markets.

While this loyalty improvement strategy is superficially simple, a uniform company philosophy and mature internal blueprint is required to carry out the approach. Integrating various successful customer service elements rather than a cohesive system sets well-intended organizations up for inconsistency, leading to customer loss and wasted revenue. The customer service-driven cultures defining [B&H Photo-Video](#) and [Crutchfield Electronics](#), carried across the electronics retailers' multi-channel communication platforms as well as brick and mortar locations, provides the competitors with firm holds in the ecommerce sector despite their relatively small sizes. Their multiple customer experience awards, include top rankings in the 2013 [Consumer Reports survey](#) of top electronics retailers.

The retailers cite cultures of courtesy and respect towards their customers combined with investments in agent training and re-education as instrumental towards standing out from their larger competitors. "After 40 years in business we are certain our success is built on [customer] satisfaction and their willingness to share that satisfaction with friends and colleagues," says Moshe Leeds, Sales Operations Manager for B&H Photo. "That in turn is built on the foundation of our unimpeachable integrity and pristine ethics."

"A company-wide philosophy is integral to the effective customer driven strategy" - Greenstone

A company-wide philosophy is integral to the effective customer-driven strategy, notes Jordan Greenstone, Crutchfield's Senior Sales Strategy Manager. Without the top-down dedication, loyalty efforts could ring hollow. He emphasizes, "In order to be effective, a focus on customer experience has to be organic. That means that it needs to be ingrained in every area of the company and every facet of the business. Even departments that are not directly interacting with customers need to operate from a customer experience perspective."

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Customer perception is taken seriously by the retailers, who follow-up with feedback and take action when necessary. B&H distributes surveys after a service or contact center experience as well as after a transaction is completed, in addition to monitoring comments left on review sites. Crutchfield also evaluates the company's success by its direct customer feedback, gathered through multiple channels "including online evaluations, social media channels, surveys, e-mails, and phone calls. In order to facilitate this we invite our customers to contact us in whatever channel they choose before, during, and after the sale. One of the biggest challenges is making sure that new customers fully understand our value proposition since, for most, their first contact with our brand is our website. We are continually looking for new ways to clearly communicate our customer experience focus to first-time visitors to Crutchfield.com."

Initial training periods for B&H and Crutchfield range from two to eight weeks, depending on specialty, with regular reboarding periods. Leeds and Greenstone say that the relatively low-cost but intensive process maintains quality care standards and increases sales. For B&H, it also resulted in the added benefit of stronger relationships with its suppliers. Leeds adds, "We make ourselves available to them and cultivate the same in return. We devote extensive resources to employee tech training, which vendors appreciate because it makes it easier for us to sell their products. We tend to buy more products and in greater quantities too. That means that not only do we have commonly requested items in stock in quantity we also have more of the less popular, esoteric, but nevertheless essential accessories which might be requested less frequently."



Jordan Greenstone, Crutchfield's Senior Sales Strategy Manager

Emotional intelligence and similar qualities cannot be taught, but is a trait to be sought out in potential candidates during the hiring process, Leeds believes. He finds that the most successful agents usually include a relationship-building, human element to their customer interactions. "Listening, really listening and not simply waiting for the customer to pause, is a talent that has to be nurtured...We do not give our sales associates scripts. We want each to bring his or her personality to the conversation. What we do expect from each is careful listening and replies tailored to each customer's individual circumstance. We reinforce that by never holding sales contests, nor by judging a sales associate on number of transactions or high-dollar transactions or the like. Our sales staff is judged primarily on three things - product knowledge, customer satisfaction, being on-time."

Leeds adds, "As our COO says, 'If we're 1 percent wrong, we're wrong.' We'd rather be elastic about a policy than stand on ceremony; we'd rather satisfy a customer even if it means applying elasticity to a policy; we'd rather the customer was happy. Nothing is more foolish than spending more resources making a customer understand a policy than what'd it'd cost to satisfy that customer."

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