At your service majesty

THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF SOUND TECHNICAL TRAINING AND SUPPORT IN THE WORLD OF COFFEE MACHINES.

"At her Majesty's service" – a phrase made famous by movie icon James Bond – signifies total commitment, a matter of life and death, to a single cause. Yet unfortunately, many businesses don't share that same level of commitment to technical support or service. In many cases, it's often viewed as a cost, a necessary evil, rather than the business critical department it should be.

While sales people drive around in their German motors, attending customer lunches in chic restaurants, wearing smooth attire with clean fingers, service people amble up and down the country in their humble white vans. 'Techies' munch down sandwiches in their overalls, finding it challenging to keep their Loctite laden fingers at bay from the whiteness of their bread.

Sales people make more money, bonuses, and attend international shows. Techies ensure that everything works to make the sales people look like heroes. In my opinion, the unsung hero is the guy with the screwdriver, not with the Mont Blanc in their hands.

A customer asked my opinion recently about starting a new coffee company. His question was, in view of my global experience, how/where would I start? I answered very quickly that building a first-class service team would be my primary concern and responsibility. It's the foundation of the business, not an afterthought. The coffee, machines, and sales people could follow.

Sales people may be the ones who get the business and get the glory as a result, but it is undoubtedly the service team that determines whether or not that customer stays with you beyond the honeymoon period. It is like all relationships – the courtship is the fun and easy part (most of the time), but the hard work is keeping the flame burning, and the commitment to long-term romance.

In my line of work, I meet a lot of disgruntled customers, people and companies going through a painful divorce from their current provider. The reasons are always the same: "It was all good at the beginning but then the service levels went down and the negative impact on our business severe. We tried to fix it, but it fell on deaf ears. So now we have to look elsewhere."

So, how do you protect yourself against that predicament? Can Service Level Agreements be designed, maintained, and enforced? Can they resolve all issues? Experience would dictate that they do not, that they merely measure failure and that everyone can come up with their own version of data, which very seldom matches. Beyond that, as in all relationships, choose your partners well as decisions always have consequences.

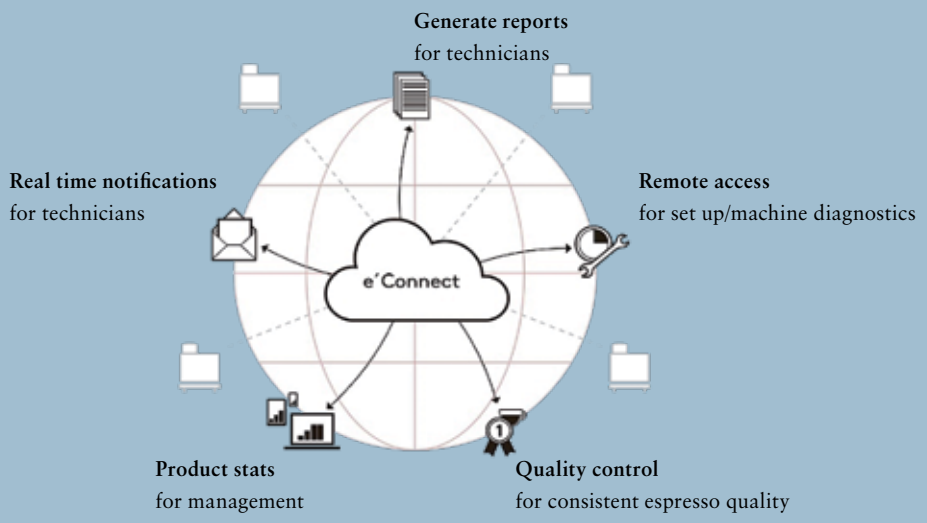
But apart from choosing the right partner, what else could be done? Today, technology can provide customers with absolute transparency through telemetry. A client can demand access to his/her equipment, design a bespoke dashboard, receive alerts of failures, and measure the efficacy of





Kamal Bengougam says all coffee businesses should invest in a quality services departnment.

Eversys machines use an e-Connect telemetry system to track and process live data from anywhere in the world.



their service providers. This transparency not only creates stakeholder visibility, but it should also help to build trust, and through trust, long-term sustainable relationships. Through those successful partnerships, long-term profits too.

Businesses cannot survive without profitability, which involves revenue generation as well as cost control. Top line revenue generation is often credited to sales people, whereas tech support is viewed as an overhead. Would it not be more accurate to allocate repeat business to the techies, making them a profit rather than a cost centre? Shouldn't you credit them with recurring revenue streams as they would be directly linked to service performance or the lack thereof? This would give them the right status in the business and recognise their true worth.

Unfortunately, most of today's businesses are evaluated from year to year, and so are decisions. Making a radical change such as this would go against the grain and the risk of not being approved would be significant. If businesses were scrutinised over a longer period of time – say three to five years – one could get a real picture of the managerial quality/competence as you could see the impact of decisions over time. Seasoned managers have become experts at hiding skeletons from year to year, but these old bones tend to rear their ugly heads over time and become more difficult to ignore.

Management today is about the short-term: results are appraised monthly/quarterly and audited yearly. In that space the impetus becomes more about stealing market share from competition than creating new business and innovating. Rather than make the pie bigger, leaders of today try to acquire a few percentage points of market share from the existing pie. They hire sales people from their competitors thinking that the business will follow them, or spend fortunes on launching new products and marketing them aggressively. In the short-term, that strategy could yield results but, is it sustainable in the long-term? Won't your competitors just do the same to you and headhunt your best people? I think that making the pie bigger should be the ultimate goal. But how do you do that? Build a business that has a foundation anchored around technical proficiency and a customer services department that is worth of its name.

One solution is to build a first-class customer services department as part of a sales and marketing strategy. A proactive, customer centric team, armed with telemetry tools that are monitored and utilised for the purpose they were designed for. People who engage in conversation with customers, problem solve, provide sound advice and direction and become your front line support sales team, your farmers. Give your techies the same status as a sales person, make them a strategic part of the business and not a mere overhead.

I think I could build a business simply by picking up those customers who are disgruntled with their current providers. This could be the new pie and we can call it Majesty. At your service, Majesty. GCR

