2 Embracing the Customer

‘Service can be described as the integration of two actors.’ (Alvin Toffler)

STAGING THE PERFORMANCE

Tomorrow’s organizations are in the business of creating lifestyle-enhancing possibilities. Their aim is not to dictate, control or sell customer lifestyles – it is to co-create customer futures. Their medium is the product or service and the process by which they are created. The medium is not passive – it is one that enables customers to discover and extend the physical and mental boundaries of their own lifestyles. As new high quality, high touch, customer tailorable and customer-specific products and services flood into the market, we are fast getting to the stage where the product or service specification is relatively unimportant. We are fast getting to the point where it is the ability of the product to dynamically empower the customer to enhance his or her lifestyle that makes the difference between active, highly-prized companion and passive low-value commodity.

What is fast becoming important, is the extent to which the product or service reflects, enhances and fits with the customer’s evolving lifestyle. To customers with fast-changing needs, static physical products and static designs run the risk of being deadly embraces – something that gets in the way after its short period of usefulness has passed, or when it has served its limited purpose in moving the customer forward. Two challenges arise. The first is to design and deliver what fits a complex customer lifestyle at a moment in time. The second is to enable the customer to dispose of it, or redesign it, when it has fulfilled its role in taking the customer to the next level of lifestyle evolution.

Product design and delivery is becoming indistinguishable from service design and delivery – the technical quality of both has to be a given for the producer to even be short-listed. Traditional approaches to both product and service design are already too slow and too confining – even with intensive market research, products and services run the risk of being overly general and bland. Traditional approaches also reflect the notion that design is static and that the product or service is its sole expression.
They risk pinning the relationship with the customer on one design that can never have more than fleeting relevance. For tomorrow's organizations, the process of design is the product, and the process of continuous design is the cornerstone of continued connectedness with the customer's lifestyle. The basis of connectedness with the customer is becoming less an issue of communicating a designer's idea or 'solution', it is rapidly becoming centred in a process of continuous dialogue between two people both intent on uncovering or defining what is going to make a difference to both.

The concerns of tomorrow's organizations shift from the tangible ones of control over resources, capital, technology, people and customers, to intangible ones such as customer-specific knowledge, a sense of timing, sensitivity to the customer, intent, and the ability to build a rapport. The sense that the customer has of being listened to and responded to as an individual by an organisation which is concerned about what the customer values, will increasingly determine if the organization has any customers. This will mean letting go of the obsession with the product – its technical quality must be a given – and replacing product obsession with an obsession with distinctive relationships with evolving customer lifestyles. The organizations that maintain their connectedness with what the customer is learning will be the only ones with any prospects of having a future (see Figure 2.1).