

SUMMARY

Who has never found himself in a dependent or even conflictual situation when faced with a representative of a State service? Who has never had the feeling of being deprived of his customer status when dealing with a banking or insurance department?

Today, everyone demands to be treated like a customer. This change can be explained notably by the transformation from a production economy where supply is less than demand, to a market economy where supply has become overabundant and where competition has stepped up. It is even keener when now entering an environmental economy, characterised by the acceleration of innovation.

Better informed, and alternately user or customer, each one therefore expects to be treated and considered as a customer. What the general public expects of administrations and companies is therefore that much more. The internationalisation of economies and the gradual disappearance of monopolies reinforces this situation.

Is it always preferable to be a customer rather than a user? And are all users always treated so badly? There are, in fact, different situations in which the user may be dissatisfied, for example in case of a strike by the public services, or in a situation of dependence when confronted with the complexity of administrative processes. However, there are also situations where the user is included or even treated as a customer in the public services and administrations.

Reading behind the lines, the difference of treatment between customers and users is not always so clear-cut. On the one hand, users may become customers, which is the case of the users of public utilities now undergoing deregulation; on the other hand, the apparent customer may be transformed into a user owing to the extreme complexity of some offers.

However, in the face of an all-powerful administration, it remains clear that we are users, which is also a guarantee of equity and the resulting relationship may include fair treatment as a customer. Likewise, whenever the mission of general interest services is well defined, its production entrusted to a public or private company can make it possible to provide good quality of service, complying with the principles of public service.

Finally, the guarantee of customer status and the treatment that must go along with it means that the public authorities have to invest in a market regulation action. All this must contribute to preserving the interests of users and customers alike.

In the face of these increasingly strong expectations, companies and administrations have sought to develop and improve their relations with their customers and users. This has resulted, in particular, in the added number of services proposed around the initial product and the development of values which accompany the supply of services, such as brands or code of ethics. We have observed real efforts in setting up offers suited to the needs of customers.

To enhance the performance of their "customer" relations, companies and administrations are able to make use of a number of tools, such as the Internet, call centres or data bases which considerably increase the capacity of communicating, differentiating and assessing satisfaction. Nevertheless, these tools are often introduced in a superficial way and not many companies have taken advantage of them to adapt their processes and modes of operation.

Furthermore, although all the companies and administrations that we have met are committed to approaches to improve their "customer" relations by making use of the same methods and tools, only a few of them have undertaken to do it on an ongoing basis.

The companies and administrations that we have met have mainly focused their efforts on their marketing policies and on setting up tools, sometimes as if the latter were an end in itself. The fact is, the "customer" orientation of the company or administration cannot be implemented without the considerable involvement of the personnel in contact with both customers and users.

The choice of men and women, which must not meet only know-how criteria, as well as their training within the organisation, are key factors in the performance of the "customer" relation. What's more, their motivation must be at the core of the company's human resources policy. There are two main levers to develop an incentive system of remuneration: the setting up of a wage system taking into account individual and collective performance and effective career management ensuring the development of the responsibilities and roles of all those concerned.

The motivation of the teams in contact with the customers or users also requires the development of initiative and autonomy. Giving suitable leeway to employees in touch with the "customers" means developing common sense and accountability, as well as favouring decision-making capability. These actions, which make cultural changes necessary, are conducive to getting closer to the "customers" of the company or administration, to understanding them better and hence to improving the perception and anticipation of their needs.

Successful examples allow us to affirm that orienting the company towards the "customer" is only possible if the entire organisation focuses internally on its employees who are in contact with the "customers". To do so, it will be necessary to reduce the hierarchical channels and adapt the modes of management.

This new orientation of the company and administration, supported by setting up effective and modern tools suited to the context of all those concerned, seems to us to be the key to successfully improving relations with the customer or user. It nevertheless requires the adaptation of organisations and a profound change in how people think and behave.