

Service First or How to Cream Off the Best?

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We use services provided by other people everywhere. Every day we have contact with sales assistants in stores, receptionists at hotels, consultants in banks and ticket collectors on public transport. That said, this contact can sometimes lead to discontent or conflict.

The task of providing services at a higher level is important to all countries; however, in Russia service quality has always been a problem. Back in Soviet times, service was ironically dubbed "unobtrusive," because it was fairly inconspicuous, if at all present. Complicated relationships between the seller and buyer are historically deep-rooted in Russian society. For instance, under serfdom the social distance between the upper and lower classes was extremely great. Apparently, it is historical memory that makes some people still believe that those who receive a service should be dominant over those who render it.

If buyers want to be served appropriately, they should get on the right side of the sales assistant, get their foot in the door as it were. Smiling seems to be an easy way to defuse tension. But Russians are reluctant to smile at strangers and even deplore those who carry a social, American smile on their faces.

Besides, the service industry in Russia is not a particularly enviable profession. It is an arguable commonplace that anyone may serve clients as long as they have not yet made a career choice, or need money and want to find a job close to their home. These employees go with the flow, view customers as a drag, look upon their work as temporary and add to high staff turnover.

Surveys have shown that many people are capable of rendering service at an appropriate level,

but only within a short period of time and if they are in a good mood. And only those who have a natural capacity to deal with customers may do so with respect to any client, on any day, and fulfil their duties in the best possible way even if they feel tired or sick. Indeed, the ability to render help and support is in the same category as musical or mathematical skills! Is it possible to find people who genuinely like clients? People who care about helping, who are patient with and attentive to other people, who are good listeners and always eager to provide explanations?

When looking for staff with a basic natural capacity to cooperate with clients, special tests developed by professional psychologists are used in international practice. One of those is Service First developed by Swedish company Assessio.

The Service First test is used to select people for positions that call for ongoing contact with customers, such as sales assistants, sales managers, hotel and restaurant staff, call center personnel, consultants with banks and insurance companies, and so on. The ease of filling out forms and the pace at which a report is produced make Service First an irreplaceable tool in the process of mass recruitment and personnel assessment. The test measures people's ability to help and support others, their internal desire and need to help, as well as the need to cooperate with others in problem solving.

Apart from an evaluation, the test encompasses four aspects of information and advisory client services:

- Active customer relations — proactive in finding opportunities for sales and service.
- Polite customer relations — displays politeness, is agreeable to customers.
- Helpful customer relations — fulfills and exceeds customer expectations.
- Personalized customer relations — notices unique aspects of relations with individual customers.

The Service First test has long been used in the international practice. As is evident from considerable research conducted by Assessio in various countries, the use of Service First in recruitment and assessment cuts down costs for repeated headhunting and decreases staff turnover. The test has a validation sample of more than 38,000 persons and is translated into English, Russian, Norwegian, Swedish, Polish, Latvian, Estonian, Danish and Finnish. Service First was chosen as Product of the Year in "The Best Tool for Recruiting in the Service Sphere" nomination in Britain in 2006. Following its science adaptation of the Russian validation sample, the test has entered our domestic market thanks to the CASE company that represents Assessio in Russia.

For those involved in mass recruitment for positions related to customer service, using the test will help optimize the recruitment procedure, since it makes it possible for only those candidates who find client service exciting and attractive to be targeted and interviewed.

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