Service innovations required to achieve cost benefits, customer experience: Aircel's Alok Kumar

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NEW DELHI: Aircel is using customer listening strategy and technologies like Big Data and analytics tools to improve subscriber experience, along with methodologies adopted at Aircel call centres to optimise costs. Alok Kumar, Head-Customer Services tells ET's Danish Khan, that the measures are helping the telco improve customer satisfaction. Edited excerpts:

What is your 'customer listening' strategy'? Are you using any data analytics mechanism while leveraging Big Data?

Creating a 'Customer Listening' strategy is a key to an organization's long term survival strategy. We are driven by customer insights and feedback. Today we offer instant resolution (On-call) to almost 97% of our call center interactions, which in turn ensures a happy customer.

We gather regular feedback through multiple means such as social media, blogs, channels such as emails, call centres and through Aircel Website. Today we service over around 1.7 crore interactions each month across all key service touch-points.

Under our 'Customer First' programme, every manager in the company is mandated to be spending half a day at Aircel Retail partners or POS every month. Through this initiative we've been engaging with over 250 retailers each month directly through our leadership teams.

We also conduct external researches conducted by specialized agencies, Business Intelligence (BI) tools and assurance audits of key service touch points.

The BI tools used at Aircel enables the company to view customer interaction insights at a granular level basis which they are now in the process of directly linking customer experience with KPIs of respective cross functional teams. Aircel has invested in B.I. systems such as Terradata and Business Objects that help in mining customer insights through 'big data analysis'.

What are the new methodologies adopted at Aircel call centres to optimise costs?

Aircel has adopted a three pronged methodology and strategy to reduce costs.

Under the strategy, we are partnering with local partners in each state. Local call centre representatives give us the advantage of lower cost of operations, ability to provide employability to local staff who are more familiar with nuances such as dialect and geography and who also have an interest to stay longer with the organization.

Further, we have innovated our training methodology and system which cuts down the classroom lead time by 50% for new agents and accelerates their effectiveness on the floor.

In addition to that we have moved away from Average Handling Time on which call center partners and agents were traditionally measured and paid to a new measurement system CHAT - Call Handled in Appropriate Time that targets Call Handling time based on the importance & criticality of the call and whether it needs an agent support or can be handled through self help education options or over a text message. This has helped Aircel improve efficiency of call handling by at least 10-15% across our partners while also helping our agents get more clarity on how to handle different category of calls.

Have you also increased the number of seats in call centers to improve service?

Currently, we have around 4500 agents working with Aircel across 18 call center partners - all of whom go through training on customer handling, soft skills, processes, systems training & simulation exercises for 10 days before they take customer interaction calls. Having said that, the number of representatives in call centres is being increased on a monthly basis in line with the increase in subscriber base and basis the quarterly forecast of expected volume of calls.

Is there a shift happening from customer service to customer experience? Do you see your employees playing an important role in this?

Certainly the shift is very evident. Service industries across the world have graduated from providing just 'customer service' to providing a wholesome 'customer experience'. Brands today are looking at newer ways to satisfy and 'delight' the customer like never before and therefore constant, engaging and transparent interaction with the brand in the right and positive manner becomes paramount and continues to be the most significant contributor to 'customer experience'. Telecom is a highly customer centric sector, where literally customer is the king- everything, right from products and services to recharge options are designed keeping the customer's need in mind. Thus, the need of the hour is that telecom industry should undertake service innovations to achieve significant gains in terms of cost, experience, process improvement and above all, alignment with customer needs.

Our recent innovations in the sphere of customer services are in this direction only- to deliver on customer experience rather than only customer service. Be it Aircel's customer listening strategy or the

way we handle our customers at the retail touch points or through the call centers, we always try and make sure that the customer experience meets the need of the market and the delivery is made as delightful as possible irrespective of the touch-point.

In this process, the role of the employees across functions becomes absolutely critical. They are the first brand ambassadors of the brand.

Please tell us about other initiatives to improve customer experience.

In customer services, one of the initiatives that Aircel undertook recently was to reorient the way services are delivered in the Indian telecom sector in two ways- by improving experience from customers' point of view and also gradually lowering the 'cost to serve' for Aircel. Aircel imbibed best practices from other industries as well and worked towards 'retailization of service.'

As tele-density increases & complexity of smartphones & data services rise, the role of the retailer becomes paramount in servicing the end point consumer. The comfort of consumers in semi urban and rural communities in dealing through a retail (face to face preferably in local dialects) rather than IVRS or call center for his telecom needs is very high. At Aircel, we recognised this and embarked on engaging and empowering retailers to be able to provide service to their walkins. Through this they not only provide guidance and resolution to their neighbourhood community but also in the process improve their own business through upsell and cross sell opportunities - whenever a customer walks into their shop for taking service.

To enable retailers to become an effective addressal point for consumers, Aircel has also scaled up its backend mechanisms and has created more mechanisms for easy logging of customer issues at retail points. This enables the 'service empowered' retailers to gain from higher footfalls through bettering the tertiary sales of various telecom products and services from their shops This model is now successfully working in UP East, Bihar, Assam, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, North East and Himachal Pradesh and we have over 3600 retailers fully operating on this model.

As part of this initiative, Aircel customer services team and rolled out 'Mobile Seva Kendra' app that empowers a retailer to capture in 'multilingual' options a walk-in customer's service needs - which gets seamlessly transferred to backend resolution teams for tagging and addressal. This application empowers a retailer to support their 'walkins' for any telecom needs and offers a customer the ease of dealing with a neighbourhood store -giving familiarity of local language, 'face to face' interaction capability and locational proximity, making it far superior to 'traditional' Call Center support.

How has been uptake of this app? How much % of retailers using it, and the outcome?

1550 out of 3600 Aircel Seva Kendra's - 42% are using Mobile Seva Kendra for customer issue handling. This new channel has grown to approx. 18% of tickets logged coming through this channel**.**