



Customer Service

Wales' Hidden Advantage

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[WHITEPAPER]



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Outline Of This Paper

The ability to deliver a high level of customer service and respond to an increasingly demanding and vociferous customer base has become crucial for businesses in recent years. Indeed, for many, it has become the number one area of competitive advantage. However, despite the importance of the customer experience in business success, there is little discussion with regard to how good we as a Welsh nation are at delivering great service.

This paper has been developed by Deighton Consultants and The Welsh Contact Centre Forum to discuss raising the global status of Wales' service industry. Contributions have been made by contact centre and customer service experts across various business sectors in Wales.

The authors believe that Wales, as a nation, has key characteristics and capabilities that could allow it to compete in a global customer service market and that our credentials have been proven by the companies that operate here.

The paper outlines Wales' key strengths, discusses the challenges we face in raising the profile of our service culture and suggests some major steps that can be taken to do so.



Foreword

The Welsh Contact Centre Industry, in 2015, is going from strength to strength. A major contributor to the Welsh economy, home to some of the country's biggest name companies, a key provider of opportunities and containing some of the country's most hardworking, dedicated individuals in Wales - it really is something to be proud of. In my position as Managing Director of the Welsh Contact Centre Forum, I've been privileged to watch the industry grow over the past decade and a half, due largely to the constant desire to do just that little bit better, to push the possibilities further, with customer service being put at the heart of Welsh Contact Centres.

There's no doubt that Wales is uniquely placed to make a serious impact on the global customer service stage. So where are we?

Getting the word out about Wales' customer service culture is going to be major part of how the industry grows over the next five to ten years. Our country has long been a location of choice for those looking to re-shore their centres, or companies wanting to move within the UK, or even to those just starting out. What they're looking for is the quality of staff that Wales provides in abundance – personable, genuine and with an innate understanding of how to talk to customers and each other. As a nation, we're 'people' people, and that shows.

As a sector, we've got the skills and the capabilities we need to raise Wales' customer service profile – but we can't do it alone. As well as working together within the industry, we need the full support of the Welsh Government, who must recognise that championing the industry will, ultimately, benefit Wales as a whole. It's also vital that we start to strengthen our links with Wales' flourishing academia, to help increase awareness of customer service as a viable area in which to build strong, sustainable, rewarding careers. This paper outlines how we can build on what we have started, to make these things happen and the challenges we'll have to prepare for.

Ultimately, it comes down to finding new ways to tell the world what we already know: Wales is one of the best places for customer service in the UK and, quite possibly, the world.



*Sandra Busby,
Managing Director –
Welsh Contact Centre Forum*

Some Context:



Wales Exceeds At Customer Service - So Why Don't We Talk About It?

A new view on the service capabilities
of the nation as a whole.

Great service is invariably regarded as the trump card in the success of any business. Despite the debates that rage as to what great service really means, how best to measure it, who is best at it and what financial benefits it brings to a business, the one thing that most commentators agree on is that the last ten years has seen a marked shift in customer attitudes. We, as customers, are now more savvy, more demanding and more cynical than ever before, while also being increasingly fickle and intolerant of poor service. We now embrace the opportunity to complain where only recently we would have shied away. We now readily switch supplier if we are unhappy with how they are performing.

This all adds up - recently it's been estimated that UK businesses are losing some around 6-7bn a year due to poor customer service (New Voice Media). While they may sometimes struggle to put their words into practice, or lack understanding of what it means to be a customer of their organisation, business leaders readily admit that over the coming years, customer service - and not price - will form the key battleground.

Although individual organisations frequently quote how many of their customers are 'satisfied' with the service they receive or the number who would 'recommend' them, there are very few references as to how good we as a Welsh nation are at delivering great service. Nobody seems to talk about the 'service culture' that exists in Wales.

Despite the fact that the service or contact centre operations of many of the UK's largest and most respected organisations are found in Wales, there is little in the public domain that promotes Wales' ability to provide great customer service - something which helps make this country an exemplary place to do business.



The Welsh Government's own Wales.com website lists a number of reasons why businesses should locate in Wales - good communication infrastructure, industry networks and access to finance to name a few - but we also need to highlight our 'service culture' and expertise. We have been guilty in the past of promoting ourselves to the world as the 'low cost' option rather than a country with a true culture of service excellence. This needs to change.

To solve the problem, we have to first understand it fully. To this end, senior directors and managers of a dozen organisations with significant service operations based in Wales were surveyed. The objective was to gain a clearer insight into the service industry in Wales, assess the extent to which we have a 'service culture' here and identify the actions we must take to further promote Wales in this context. Participants were each responsible for the strategy and day-to-day operation of a contact centre, or had overall responsibility for customer service within the organisation. The organisations involved covered a cross-section of finance, outsourcing, utilities and media sectors.

The study was conducted by Deighton Consultants and supported by the Welsh Contact Centre Forum (WCCF).

Does Wales Have A True 'Service Culture'?

Looking at what makes Welsh customer service uniquely valuable.

So, can we deliver great service in Wales? Among the business leaders we talked to, the answer is a unanimous 'yes!' Our ability to deliver outstanding customer service is firmly believed to be as good as - if not better than - anywhere else in the UK or Europe. For the majority, this view is founded on hard evidence and direct customer feedback, although some suggested that their opinion was based on more anecdotal evidence. After all, why would so many major organisations locate their service operations here in Wales if we couldn't deliver the customer service capabilities they need?

"I think Wales has a great and well-deserved reputation for talented workers. Gocompare.com's biggest asset is the people who work here, and one of the reasons for basing Gocompare.com in Wales was the abundance of brilliant people available in the area who could deliver great service to our customers across all areas of the business. We've invested heavily in finding the right people to help take the business forward and I'm happy to say that the majority of these live in the local area."

*Hayley Parsons -
Founder & CEO, GoCompare*

The root cause of this innate customer service skill is clear - it is the sense of community that pervades the Welsh culture. We are genuinely concerned for others and, by extension, our customers. We listen intently to them, understand their perspective and genuinely wish to help. At the same time, we have an empathetic, sensitive, welcoming and friendly disposition.

"Yes, we certainly have a service culture here in Wales and that comes from my experience of two large banks, both with various service operations in Wales. In both organisations external surveys regularly showed that the results were always higher than the rest of the UK. What is interesting is that the comments from respondents regularly painted a picture of a workforce that is more personable, communicative, takes ownership of issues, gives out names to make it easier for the customer and handles issues without passing it on to someone else. We have a culture that is very welcoming, with a sense of community and that leads directly into our service culture."

*Tim Pezzack -
Divisional Director, Santander*

"There is a sense of modesty and trustworthiness that endears people in Wales to others. There are no 'airs and graces'. For example, I have a lady who works here who does some fantastic stuff for our customers and gets tremendous feedback. But all she will say is 'It's just my job!' I see a lot of that here."

Michelle Beech -
Head of Service Assurance, Virgin Media

"To provide great service, you must want to chat to people and interact with them. Anyone can answer the 'phone, but it's about having a sense of community, a common purpose and familiarisation that makes a great service person - and we do have that in abundance here, and not necessarily elsewhere. We are empathetic and sensitive, and I think we have all the skills needed to provide great customer service."

John Trace -
Contact Centre Director, HSBC

"The intangible aspects of delivering a great service are key and this is very prominent here in Wales. I guess it is a cultural thing - there is a real service culture here in Wales and I believe this is based upon the sense of community we have in this country and the traditional family values that are ingrained into us. We are a friendly nation and this, along with our desire to help people, really underpins the service ethos we have here."

Allan Griffiths - Group Ambassador
for Wales, Lloyds Banking Group

In addition to this, there is an overwhelming belief that here in Wales we are truly passionate about serving our customers. It's a trait more associated with being Welsh than any other - we like dealing with people, we treat them as we want to be treated and we have the mind-set and work ethic to take responsibility for resolving our customer's problems.

"I have never found anywhere more passionate about serving individual customers than here in Wales. I think it's down to their work ethic. Also there's a 'no bullshit' culture - if it's wrong, then there's no problem, no fuss, let's just get together and fix it. We can be trusted to say what we think and at the same time, if we're going to do something and tell you, then we will do it!"

Michelle Beech -
Head of Service Assurance, Virgin Media

“Key to great service is the people delivering it and in that respect, we can’t be beaten here in Wales. The Welsh are very people-focussed and just have that ‘special thing’ that is needed. We have an innate ability to provide great service and are far more passionate about it than you see elsewhere.”

*Carol Bogue-Lloyd -
Global Delivery Director, Atos*

Many also believe that Welsh accents endear us to our customers:

“People have told me that there is a sense of satisfaction from talking to people in Wales. They say, ‘I like talking to you - your voice is melodic and I like the up and down lilt of the Valleys accent.’ As such, people know it’s a good thing to set up a contact centre in Wales as opposed to in other parts of the country.”

*John Trace –
Contact Centre Director, HSBC*

“What is true is that the people in Wales have an appreciation of service culture, and we have real evidence from our NPS study that people like the Welsh accent. Along with the attitude, tone of voice and initiative shown are the reasons they have had such a great experience.”

*Richard Mansell - BFP & UKSL
Operations Director, Barclaycard*

“I think the Welsh accent is a real strength - people say it is very calming and like the inflection at the end. It is a very friendly, welcoming accent. Having worked in a number of contact centres around the UK, people here are more relaxed and down-to-earth than other cultures.”

*Corrie Newport - Senior Manager
New Business Processing, Blackhorse*

So Why Aren't We Shouting About It?

The importance of promoting Wales' customer service excellence on the global stage.

While there is little to question the view that we in Wales relish the service environment, and have a passion for engaging with our customers, it is absolutely clear that when it comes to promoting ourselves and our expertise, we are letting ourselves down badly.

Many companies based in Wales may have individual reputations for delivering the highest levels of service, but this does not extend to the nation as a whole. While those working in the service sector have the desire and 'emotional intelligence' required to deliver great service, as a nation we appear to lack the self confidence and self-belief to shout about it, along with a reluctance to project this image other than on a local stage.

"I think part of the problem we have is that we don't really know how to go about promoting ourselves – and this is our main fault. We spend a lot of time shouting internally about the awards we have won, but are more reluctant to do so outside of Wales."

*Kathryn Chivers - Vice President
Sales Operations, Firstsource*



"We don't seem to shout about our ability to deliver great service at all. I don't think this reluctance exists only in Wales; it's a British thing. We have lots of contact centre awards - both in the UK and Europe – and we should get up there and crow about it, but sometimes we aren't very good at flying our own flag."

*John Trace -
Contact Centre Director, HSBC*

"Promoting ourselves? This feels like it's sporadic. Yet we should be, worldwide, a place where people want to come to see how service is done."

*Lynda Campbell -
Regional Director for Wales, British Gas*

At the same time, while it may be true that as a nation we shy away from the spotlight, some of those in our survey also believe that we are unsure how to go about enhancing what little international reputation we have for service excellence. Worse still, we may not even know what our message should be!

How Can We Move Forward?

Three key areas we can improve to raise the nation's service profile.

So we excel at service, but are not so good at shouting about it, despite the fact that those in our survey believe we have all the ingredients necessary to position Wales at the forefront of the industry and real potential to become a 'Hub' for customer service across both the UK and Europe.

Unfortunately, we are failing to capitalise on the opportunities that exist, both in terms of putting Wales on the map and in attracting increased levels of inward investment.

So what do we need to do to enhance our reputation for service excellence, make Wales a truly attractive place to do business and encourage companies to relocate their service operations here to benefit from what we have to offer?

The solution can be outlined in three key actions.

- 1. We must develop and engage in a coherent strategy.**
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While there is recognition of the effort that is being made promoting Wales as a place to do business, industry leaders now believe a strategy is needed between WG, leading service organisations and the various trade associations on the subject of our core strengths, what exactly it is we offer and the main messages that we should convey. The introduction of a strong 'shared-interest' strategy will highlight our reputation for service, attract new investment and position Wales firmly at the centre of the 'customer service' space.

While there is recognition of the support currently provided through the WG's account manager network, there is a belief that a more 'customer-centric' approach is required. Rather than being the focal point of any drive to enhance our reputation for service excellence, there is a demand for the WG to 'put the customer first' and be far more flexible in how it supports those service organisations that form a key part of our economy. The importance of the service sector to Wales must be truly recognised, as must the specific needs of its key players. The WG needs to become more flexible in the way it provides its support - whether this is in relation to funding, the delivery of training or any other aspect of its business support role. This will ensure that the WG facilitates the future success of the sector rather than hindering it.

"It is crucial that the WG supports each sector in the way that is best for that sector – they must understand how each business wants to grow and how they can best support this to facilitate their success. We must work with every organisation to establish needs and involve the appropriate industry body or association in ensuring that we have the correct package of support for that individual client. It just needs people to agree a set of shared objectives that is for the benefit of that organisation."

Ben Cottam -
Head of ACCA Wales

The same is true when it comes to attracting those organisations that are considering relocation to Wales. Rather than being perceived as little more than an enhanced 'estate agent', our study suggests that the WG must adopt a more proactive, private sector perspective, working in conjunction with the various industry bodies and associations to support and deliver against the individual, strategic objectives of each new 'customer'.

"The WG needs to be able to offer Anchor Companies directly funded solutions for in-house apprenticeship training. Such an approach would create a stronger link between the training and guaranteed jobs at its end. A 3rd party delivery model does not suit most large enterprises who need to instil their own culture and approach into their apprentices from the outset.

It is probable that a directly-funded approach would provide better value for money for the public purse as the cost per head would be lower and the percentage support required per apprentice would almost certainly be less than 50%. This approach would not only be very attractive to companies already based here, who should be encouraged to remain and expand in Wales, but could also become a key element of our inward investment strategy. Embracing this approach proactively and working with business to deliver it would be a better guarantee of creating jobs and growth.'

*Ann Beynon -
Director Wales, BT*

2. We must engage more fully with academia.

The role of academia is critical to this more co-ordinated approach. While courses are available that provide something of a foundation for students interested in a career in the service sector, a closer, forward-thinking relationship must be fostered with our universities and colleges if we are to firmly cement Wales at the forefront of 'service excellence'.

Paramount here is the requirement for our academic institutions to be far more proactive in engaging with service businesses to drive up service skill levels, working more effectively in 'partnership' to create and deliver courses at all levels, designed to raise the bar. This will help provide a foundation for the future development of the service sector here in Wales.

"WG must realise that if we are going to attract businesses to Wales, we must be more proactive in promoting ourselves and making service a real career. If we want to be truly recognised for providing great service, we must recognise the importance of this to our economy and provide formal qualifications as part of a career path. We should make it something that young people can work towards and be inspired by."

*Carol Bogue-Lloyd -
Global Delivery Director, Atos*

“We must link education into the contact centre and service culture. There are diplomas out there, and academic institutions providing customer service and contact centre skills, but I should tell you that since I’ve been working here, not one college has tried to contact me to talk about what they can do for us.”

*John Trace -
Contact Centre Director, HSBC*

This closer, more far-sighted relationship with academia will provide an effective strategy for ensuring that Wales is well prepared to meet the ever changing and more demanding expectations of customers – by understanding how ‘customer service’ will look in the next 20 years, we will be able to foster the skills and training that will put us ahead of the game.

“We are starting to expect much more from our people now and the gulf between the people working here now and 5 years ago is enormous. However, we use up a lot of energy on consultants to get them to the level we want and we need colleges and universities to join together with business to support this and bring people up-to-speed.

We would like to see an extension of what we are doing with psycholinguistics and see this offered at degree level & NVQ level so that we are the only place in the world that is offering this. This would fuel the employment pool with higher skills and the right DNA at the outset and wouldn’t involve us spending the time we currently do getting staff to the standard required, It’s not good enough now to be an ‘Average Joe’ – you must set the bar much higher as customers’ expectations are now much higher than they were.”

*Lynda Campbell –
Regional Director for Wales, British Gas*

“The big opportunity we have is to understand what the contact centre industry will look like in 20 years time. We must understand this and begin to work towards it. From a WG point of view, we need to make sure they get the relevant skills in line with what is – and will be – needed in this area. How do we marry-up expectations and get people early, in terms of how they can deliver on the values that are important to them and also play a part in the local community? We need to tap into the potential they may have for working in the contact centre industry early enough and work with the WG to stimulate and support that potential early on.”

*Michelle Beech –
Head of Service Assurance, Virgin Media*

3. We must be more proactive in marketing our service expertise.

Finally, even with a more coherent strategy and more effective links with academia, there is a strong belief that as a nation we simply need to act now. We should procrastinate less and shout more - let's just 'get out there'! There is clear frustration that we are not making more noise and capitalising on the compelling tale we have to tell - a story that will highlight to potential investors the multitude of reasons to relocate to Wales. The Welsh media has a key role to play in recognising our service expertise. There is also a need for this message to be promoted outside Wales, including international markets.

We have the ammunition we need to convince business that a move to Wales would bring real, tangible benefits - what we must do is utilise the information we have on service organisations based here, understand why they made the decision to relocate to Wales and highlight the advantages they have enjoyed as a result.

“We have to get out there and show people the standards we can deliver. Let them know there's a culture, interest and appetite for customer service here in this country. You can build a contact centre anywhere, but the competition in Wales is really fierce; we need to take the message out and challenge organisations nationally – why wouldn't you want to bring your business to Wales?”

There are a lot of businesses out there and they will come here, and not just because of the tax-breaks. There is much more to focus on here and we must sell the culture, attitude and desire to excel as well.”

*Michelle Beech -
Head of Service Assurance, Virgin Media*

“What we need is stability. Part of any organisation’s success is continuity and we must be interested in making sure that the staff that we have are part of our service culture in the future. We must make sure we have the right mix of cost, skills and quality. We must not be the cheapest and stress that for the right price, you will get the right level of quality. Also, we have a great track-record in South Wales with, among others, Virgin Media and British Gas based here. There are very large contact centres here who deliver great quality and we should make more use of this to sell ourselves.”

*Richard Mansell - BPF & UKSL
Operations Director, Barclaycard*

“We must be at all the main events around the world that focus on the customer experience and speaking at these. We should be promoting ourselves and telling our success stories, but I believe we could do better promoting ourselves. People will follow a story – not a message we put out which says, ‘We are great’.

We should pull together some sort of book or something similar that we could use. Let it include all the great stories of how we have made the journey from where we were to where we have got to.”

*Lynda Campbell -
Regional Director for Wales, British Gas*

But no matter how persuasive the message, it is only by experiencing the facilities, culture and environment here that our business leaders believe we can truly market Wales as the location for any service operation. Why do we not organise conferences, exhibitions and other events - focusing on the theme of customer service - designed to bring potential investors to Wales to experience first-hand all that we have to offer?

What is clear is that this is not a story that should be told by WG; we must use those major service operations that are based here. They have the first-hand experience - and more importantly the kudos - to convey our message in the optimum way.

“What we should do is organise one big event here in Wales, focussing on the service sector and showcase the experience we have here. Between us, in the industry, we have enough of a network across the world to get the message out to the right people. If we had the major service providers run it, new businesses would be more likely to listen than if it was held by the WG.

Make it free so that they only have to worry about travel, and tell them our story and why being in Wales has been such a benefit to us.”

*Lynda Campbell -
Regional Director for Wales, British Gas*

“One thing we should do as a nation is to develop a series of case studies focusing on the issue of service. Let’s get companies who’ve moved here to showcase how they have benefitted from relocating to Wales and the high level of service we deliver here.”

*Allan Griffiths - Group Ambassador
for Wales, Lloyds Banking Group*

Quite simply, we must act now to generate more opportunities for target organisations to fully immerse themselves in the culture and environment that makes Wales a beacon for the service industry.

Final Thoughts

While it is unlikely to be the only reason to relocate to Wales, the simple fact is that customer experience is the major differentiator, underpinning any decision to recommend a Wales-based organisation. While we may not have spent sufficient time promoting the service skills we have as a county, it is absolutely clear that our strength in this area is a fundamental reason why companies based in Wales could gain a real long-term advantage over their competitors.

Business leaders are certain that we possess the attitude and innate ability to firmly establish Wales as a centre of service excellence, which will greatly add to our capacity to attract increased inward investment.

The opportunities are clearly there, but we must now take full advantage of these. The WG, the service industry, trade associations such as the WCCF and the academic institutions must begin to realise that the key ingredients exist in abundance here in Wales. What we need now is a common goal, agreement on our USP and a willingness to adopt a clear, mutually beneficial strategy.

Whitepaper developed jointly between Deighton Consultants and the WCCF.

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We are grateful for the time given by the following participants in this study:

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Gareth has over 25 years experience helping organisations enhance the relationship they have with their customers and deliver a better 'customer experience'. Delivering a clear understanding of their 'as is' customer offering, he works with clients to define tailored, 'to-be' solutions and drive the organisational and process change required from customer feedback to achieve this.

He has spoken and written widely on the issues of customer service, from both customer and employee perspectives and has won industry awards for his work linking service to changes in culture and increased profitability.

He is passionate about putting 'customer service' on the agenda in Wales and recognising the talent that exists in the country for providing an exceptional 'customer experience'.

In developing this report, Deighton Consultants was supported by two partners:

The Welsh Contact Centre Forum

The Welsh Contact Centre Forum (WCCF) is a high value Employers' Forum for the contact centres, shared service centres and financial service businesses in Wales. Its members run over 200 contact centres, employing more than 30,000 people worth over £650m to the Welsh economy annually.