

CASE STUDY

MCFARLANE TELFER LTD BECOMES ONE OF THE FIRST SMES TO ACHIEVE CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE – WITH THE HELP OF SGS UNITED KINGDOM LTD

ISSUED – MARCH

In November 2012, McFarlane Telfer became one of the first private SMEs to achieve Customer Service Excellence (CSE). The company delivers a planned and reactive maintenance service for commercial catering and refrigerated equipment to high-end users, such as private schools, private healthcare, business and industry, and the public sector.

Up until now, the majority of organisations who have taken advantage of CSE have been within the public sector; however, McFarlane Telfer's success shows how private sector companies can gain a business benefit from the standard too.

"We identified the need for CSE as a result of recent significant growth," says Managing Director Chris Craggs. "We needed to look at ways we looked after and supported our customers. CSE offered a comprehensive framework and the rigour and credibility associated with independent UKAS accredited external verification."

THE CSE JOURNEY

In January 2012, McFarlane Telfer set out to improve their customer care standards and as a result to cut customer "churn" by 50 per cent. The project was launched to the company at its monthly communications meeting that involved all staff. This gathered pace during the year as all employees became actively involved and made their contribution.

With the help of an external consultant Stephen Cunnell, the company conducted an initial mapping exercise against the standard and face-to-face research with a sample of 12 customers during February and March 2012. This established perceptions of the company's performance against their service expectations.

These results were presented in March at the company's communications meeting, with follow-up sessions at subsequent meetings that involved staff in specifying and taking ownership of the planned changes. The detailed customer journey was also mapped to identify the pinch points in the process. New CSE target measures were introduced, progress was monitored, and all evidence compiled in the CSE case file for eventual submission to the Assessor.

"The commitment and buy-in of the whole team was key," adds Chris Craggs. "As well as our monthly team meetings we went out and talked to our customers at all levels and in different formats (notionally independent research through to Team Leaders carrying out face-to-face interviews on customers' premises). We also ran a very successful customer open day."

The company ran disability training and other CSE-related training and staff consultation. Also introduced were new ways of communicating performance to customers via a McBrief email, a new website and information in email footers.

SGS INVOLVEMENT

"SGS was involved from the outset, agreeing timescales and fees," says Chris Craggs. "We then asked for a pre-assessment review, for which we prepared a comprehensive file of evidence. This left a manageable number of areas for investigation and review at the time of the formal assessment."

"We found some difficulty in interpretation when applying a standard evolved for the public sector, in dealing with consumers to a more narrowly

focused business-to-business service provider. For example, in our business niche we simply do not happen to deal with many disadvantaged or minority customers. We deal directly only with professional catering operations."

"That said, we found that our appointed SGS Assessor was particularly helpful in the pre-assessment meeting in helping us with these grey areas."

"At first sight, assessing a B2B SME against the standard does not seem a natural fit," says SGS Assessor Terry Pilcher. "But the company thought it through and were able to show how customer service is a natural part of its philosophy."

"McFarlane Telfer looked at other standards but they saw how CSE could actually help them improve their business. This is a nice approach because it is not saying 'we will' do it to get the medal', but to improve the business. When I walked in to the company, I got a real sense of their enthusiasm. All the people there were tuned in to being ambassadors for the company. There was a lot of enthusiasm for the standard and getting it done."

As a result of the year's work, McFarlane Telfer achieved the CSE standard and, although it is still early days, has already started to see a significant impact on customer satisfaction and retention rates.

The SGS logo is displayed in a large, bold, sans-serif font. A vertical line is positioned to the right of the letters 'S', 'G', and 'S', and a horizontal line is positioned below the letters 'S', 'G', and 'S', forming a partial frame around the text.

BENEFITS THROUGHOUT THE COMPANY

With CSE in place, the company has now improved its awareness of customer service issues across the company.

"We were not good or active enough," says Chris Craggs. "But the growth in awareness, the systems and the need to proactively go out, solicit responses and feedback the good news is a game-changer for us. The most critical change we have made is to maintain regular and recorded feedback sessions with customers, take action on any comments resulting – and the need to circulate bad and good news, internally and externally."

Stephen Cunnell adds, "The culture of the company has changed significantly as a result of CSE, with everyone much more aware of customer requirements, where each fits in the customer journey, their role in delivering Customer Service Excellence, and how all aspects of the journey interact with each other. As well, the badge is nice to have, particularly as the new name 'Customer Service Excellence' is much more descriptive of the benefit compared with the old Charter Mark, with its ill-defined meaning."

"Implementing the standard takes a lot of hard work," says Chris Craggs, "but the benefits are real. The main lessons we derived from the CSE journey were the vital understanding and involvement of the whole team," adds Chris Craggs. "As well, capturing and measuring deficiencies, resolving complaints early, and requiring individuals to be personally responsible for their customers. Plus the need to go and actively tell customers about the good service that we deliver."

"Benchmarking against best practice elsewhere is now more prevalent," adds consultant Stephen Cunnell. "We are just starting to collect data against our new CSE KPI measures so we can track trends and take corrective action. Individual customer journeys will also be sampled and examined. Work is ongoing, with the 2013 annual assessment as the next important milestone."

CSE now stands alongside four ISO certifications, Investors in People (Gold) and the Royal Warrant for Catering Equipment Engineers in the company's portfolio of accreditations. And the company has already embarked on the London Excellence Awards 2013 (management systems) with a view to later being assessed against the EFQM standard (2014).

NOTES TO EDITORS:

McFarlane Telfer delivers a planned and reactive maintenance service for commercial catering and refrigerated equipment. Established in 1992, the company specialises in high-end users such as private schools, private healthcare, business and industry, and the public sector.

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