

Software Satisfaction Q&A: Sapphire Systems

MyCustomer.com 20th November 2008

By Neil Davey, editor



Following Sapphire Systems success at the recent Software Satisfaction Awards, Sales and Marketing Director David Singh shares the secrets to providing customer satisfaction...



With some 20 years' experience of delivering business applications, Sapphire Systems was one of the elder statesmen at the recent Software Satisfaction Awards (SSA). That's certainly given it plenty of time to refine its customer strategy - particularly as it walked away from the SSA's clutching the reseller award.

But, according to David Singh, sales and marketing director at Sapphire, the company has had the same philosophy from its very inception. "Sapphire's ethos towards customers ever since it came into being has been "Customer First" - it's that simple," he explained. "It is something that we all believe in passionately and it comes from top down."

David talked MyCustomer.com through the company's strategy – from aligning its business to its customers and its use of customer feedback - and detailed what it takes to become a customer satisfaction champion.

ND: *Having won the reseller category at the SSA, an award voted for by your customers, your business must be closely aligned to your clients. How have you achieved this?*

DS: Our clients tend to be in the SME market. In our definition that is companies of £10m to £250m turnover. We have aligned ourselves as best we can to our clients by making sure that we have a comprehensive set of business solutions and services that address the common business pains of our clients. So, for example, systems integration is a major issue for many people, so we have a team of people in place that specialise in this area. CRM is something that is being recognised by many businesses as important, and the whole 'know your customer' philosophy is key - particularly in difficult times. We therefore have a quality and compelling solution in SAP Business One. So in essence our solutions and skills reflect what our clients want and we are constantly reviewing these.

ND: *In terms of the 'know your customer' philosophy, how do you solicit and use customer feedback to have a greater understanding of your clients?*

DS: We do a number of things. Our main feedback mechanism is our annual customer survey which we run on our website. Typically we get between 250–300 people to reply to this. This survey measures the quality of service delivery right across the company; from sales and account management through to helpdesk support and call handling. Our desire is to ensure that as many of the respondents as possible categorise us as 'very good or excellent' and would be happy to recommend Sapphire.

If we see any slippage in any area, then we will take action, whether that is making sure that our calls are answered quicker, we need to beef up skills in a particular area or maybe the account manager needs to contact their clients more often. Our customer survey isn't something that we just use for marketing purposes; it is a genuine barometer of the service that we provide.

ND: *How else do you work to get a clearer picture of your customers?*

DS: We encourage our account managers to talk to their clients as often as possible, but more importantly listen to what they have to say and what their issues are. We may not always have the answer from within our own solutions portfolio, but can help them through our own network of contacts. Similarly, our consultants and help desk staff are constantly working with and talking to their own contacts within a business and as they do we build up the bigger picture of our clients and their needs.

ND: *And how have you worked to refine and optimise your service and support based on your findings?*

DS: Service and support is about two main things - people and skills. From very early on we learnt that when clients deal with us, they expect that our people to have the highest level of knowledge, they want their problems dealt with by an expert and not an 'apprentice'. They want their training delivered by someone who not only knows the product, but also who understands business and has solid experience.

We have therefore always recruited people who have the skills, qualifications and experience. It may sound a little harsh, but we don't take on juniors who we then train up - we leave that to other people. Sapphire is not the cheapest services provider in the market, we have no desire to be that, our clients therefore expect a premium level of service to do that we have to have premium people with premium skills.

We try and be as proactive as possible with clients, particularly in the area of support. One of our most popular and well received initiatives is our SoS (Sapphire on-line Support). This is a portal for our clients where we try and push out as much relevant and useful information to them as possible. On the SoS system people can find all sorts of information about their software for example latest version information, results of our pre-release testing, technical documentation, hints and tips for best use and how to movies, this is a great way of giving our clients a value added service as part of their annual support and maintenance contract.

ND: *Sapphire is wholly owned by people that are actively involved in the business on a day-to-day business. How have you seen this make a difference with regards to your customer management compared to your competitors, who may have shareholders to placate?*

DS: We believe that as a private owner managed company we are more agile than a quoted or listed company. I have first-hand experience of how long it can take to make decisions in a larger organisation that answers to the market and its shareholders and this delay ultimately impacts on your customers. A simple example - if we genuinely believe we need extra support staff or consultants and our managers are telling us they do, then we will take the decision there and then, no convoluted business cases to make or Board presentations, it just happens.

As an owner managed company we believe we care more about our clients than companies that are run by professional managers and not the owners. The same ethos is as applicable today as it was in 1986; all our staff buy into it as they see the directors and managers embracing it.

See the full interview online at: <http://www.mycustomer.com/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=134052>

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About Sapphire:

Since 1986, Sapphire have offered their clients wide-ranging practical expertise in selecting and implementing advanced financial accounting, spend control and business management solutions. Today, the company provides software, services and support for hundreds of customers worldwide. Sapphire is a founder member of the British Application Software Developers Association and is featured in the Deloitte & Touche Fast 50 Technology rankings.

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