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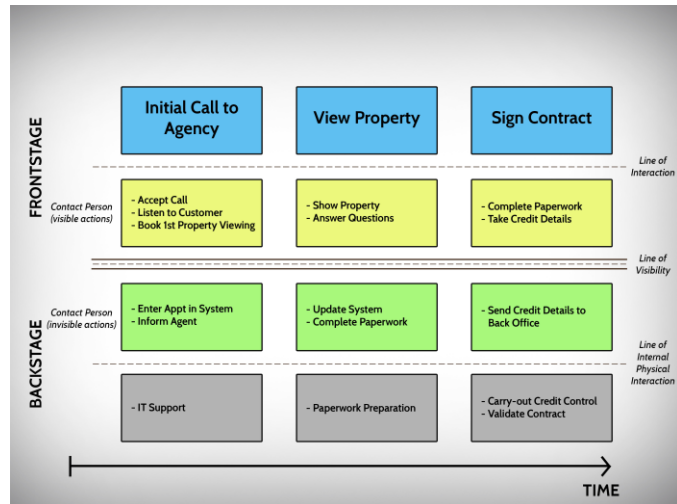
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A key aspect of the SB method incorporates the customer's view of the service delivery process within the blueprint (Zeithnam and Bitner 2000; Bitner et. al. 2008). A customer-focused SB design process (e.g., the use of customer questionnaires, collecting information from CRM databases, etc. to design the blueprint) pushed service blueprinting to evolve from a tool for adding efficiency to a service process to a map that includes all activities that lead to creating or co-creating value for the customer. For that reason, SB should be considered a strategic process rather than simply an operational process.



Real estate agencies that engage in Service Blueprinting as a strategic process will see important benefits throughout their business, and will offer a consistent, customer-oriented, united front for their customers.

Designing a Strategic Service Blueprint for Real Estate Professionals

The strategic aspects of the service blueprinting process are of equal importance to the blueprint itself. Consider these strategic actions to help you design a successful service blueprint for your agency:

1) Implement a Market-Oriented Philosophy

In order to effectively map the stages of a service delivery process, a service provider must collect a great amount of information regarding the customers (Randall 1993; Fließ and Kleinaltenkamp 2004). Then, this information should be analyzed and disseminated to all functions within the company, including frontline employees, HR/training, budgeting, etc. (Baum 1990). An agency that seeks to effectively blueprint its services must embrace a market-oriented philosophy to enable knowledge-creation and dissemination.

How well do you understand your market? What ways do you collect information about your current and prospective customers? How can you improve your market orientation to create knowledge and opportunities for your agency?

2) Establish a Service-Driven Environment

Companies that seek to effectively design a service blueprint that will ultimately increase customer satisfaction should first establish a service-driven environment. To do so, senior managers must ensure that everyone within the company (e.g., frontline employees, back-office personnel, supervisors, etc.) realizes the importance of customer satisfaction and that they give their best at each customer touch point to achieve satisfaction. Also, senior leadership must prioritize service quality and customer satisfaction, putting other initiatives (e.g., cost reduction) as lower priorities.

What ways does your agency promote customer satisfaction across all touch points? How can you communicate your commitment to a service-driven environment more effectively to your internal team? To your customers?

3) Give Emphasis to the Details

It is often said “the Devil is in the details.” In a service blueprinting process, the same is true, as the key factor of success lies in the details of your service processes. Service organizations increase the service blueprint’s detail to align the company’s operational policies with the goal of satisfying the needs of the customer. Although customers may do business with the company repeatedly, customer needs change over time. Also, customers’ expectations change as they become aware of competitive offerings. By increasing the detail of the service design process, the company ensures a more systematic approach in balancing both operational efficiency and effectiveness (Froehle et al. 2000).

Create a detailed description of the tasks involved in your service delivery process. Some of these tasks may include times of execution, quality standards, employees involved, costs, and the corresponding potential deviations, among others.

What details might you be overlooking in your service process that could help increase your agency’s customer satisfaction? How can you better align your agency’s operational policies with your customer satisfaction goals?

4) Follow Formal Procedures

In a service blueprinting process, the reliability and accuracy that formal planning procedures offer is necessary, especially in order to ensure standardization across the company. As noted by Baum (1990), most of the times a blueprint design fails to succeed, it is because the blueprint is designed hastily and crucial elements of the company’s actual services are not taken into account. A more formal design process will lead to the identification of a greater number of potential customer needs and difficult situations that might occur during the service delivery. Including additional alternative scenarios to serve your customers can be included in the blueprint, empowering the employees with more clear instructions on how to most effectively deliver the service.

Does your agency have a formal process for designing your service experience? Are there specific times throughout the year you meet to assess the effectiveness of your service delivery? What areas of your service delivery can you identify that may need attention to meet the changing needs of your customers?

5) Involve People from Different Departments

A successful blueprinting process requires a great variety of information about customer preferences, delivery expectations, costs associated with service delivery, employees' performance, etc. In order to gather all of this data, input from several departments within the company is necessary, and hence, people from each department should be involved in the design process. Involving the right people can be achieved either by formulating a formal team that includes people from different departments or by holding several inter-departmental meetings throughout the blueprinting process.

Who in your agency might you include to better inform your design process?

6) Empower Frontline Employees

In most service companies, frontline employees have to follow formal rules and offer flexible solutions at the same time. This bifurcation can lead the frontline to misunderstand their role, especially when the information provided by their supervisors is inadequate. Given that frontline employees actually implement the procedures described in a service blueprint, it is essential that they have the freedom not only to choose the appropriate "service scenario" from the blueprint, but also adjust it based on the customer's needs. In general, the existence of a blueprint encourages such freedom by clarifying who is responsible for each decision, and hence, empowering employees who have direct contact with customers to effectively enact their roles. In addition to frontline employees, all responsible team leaders and supervisors should empower their subordinates so that they can implement the predefined procedures.

Who are the frontline employees in your agency? How can your service process be adjusted to ensure customer-facing employees are empowered to effectively enact their role?

Conclusion

The use of service blueprints can really improve the quality of the services a company provides to its customers. However, the outcome of a service blueprinting process can be positive, only if the responsible managerial team does not neglect the technique's strategic aspects.

To that end, growing and established real estate agencies looking to achieve consistency and reliability across their service offerings should invest in enabling the aforementioned strategic drivers. These strategies will ensure the success of the agency's service blueprint and will make

the continuous monitoring and refinement of the blueprint much easier, leading to improved service procedures that totally satisfy customers' needs.

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