



SAILING AHEAD WITH A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC BUSINESS MODEL

Improving their customers' booking experiences is helping Singapore travel agency Stamford Travel beat the competition

Since 2010, Stamford Travel has built a strong reputation among its customers for its extensive cruise-related services. It offers personalised cruise packages to popular destinations such as the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and Alaska. Recently, however, the company realised that a growing number of customers are turning to online travel sites, such as Expedia and Travelocity, to book their travel packages.

"These days, consumers are more sophisticated, and prefer the convenience of searching and booking their travel online," says Ms Margaret Koh, Stamford Travel's Sales and Marketing Director. "We realised we needed to rethink the way our customers were gathering information about what they wanted to purchase, and their loyalty to a brand or product."

Recognising that its customers wanted to make more informed choices and

have greater involvement in the purchasing process, the company decided to design and implement a customer experience strategy. "We wanted to offer a service experience that was a cut above the online travel site," Ms Koh explains.

With the help of SPRING Singapore's Customer-Centric Initiative (CCI), the company rebranded and redesigned its cruise booking arm, Port & Porters. The CCI focuses on helping companies

undertake service improvements in areas such as service flow redesign and service innovation to deliver better customer experiences.

Understanding customers' needs

Stamford Travel recognised that by creating an improved overall customer experience, clients would feel more valued, which in turn could increase their brand loyalty. "As a first step in the rebranding process, we conducted extensive research on our customers to better understand their needs," says Ms Koh.

The company applied design thinking to help it redefine its customer experience strategy. Design thinking places the customer at the heart of every solution and involves adopting a user's perspective to understand how products or services can be improved.

"Previously, our focus was not so much on our customers' experiences, but more on the business' operational aspects. With this new approach, we now take the time to assess our customers' preferences in greater detail before designing personalised value propositions for each one of them. This keeps them coming back for more," says Ms Koh.

Delivering convenience and saving time

Prior to its rebranding, Stamford Travel's agents were spending up to three hours at a time explaining cruise options to customers. "As we carry over 40 cruise brands, it was almost impossible to explain to a customer each and every cruise line and what it offers," says Ms Koh.

The company turned this challenge into an opportunity and set up a Luxury Cruise search engine on its Port & Porters website as a further part of its rebranding effort. "Now, customers only need to enter their preferred destination, cruise line, travel month and budget, and the search engine will draw up a list of suitable options," says Ms Koh.

With the search engine, customers can decide what they want before approaching the company, which drastically speeds up the booking process.

"This new digital customer 'touchpoint' allows us to provide a more seamless customer experience, both online and offline, and provides another channel for us to communicate with our customers."

Stamford Travel used to take three weeks to close a deal. Now it can do so in as little as two days. "As a result, we have seen a 10% increase in sales



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Managing customer data efficiently

As a growing business, Stamford Travel had often struggled to cope with an increasing number of customers and bookings. As a third focus of the rebranding exercise, it decided to put in place a customer relationship management (CRM) system so it could streamline various aspects of its workflow.

The CRM system automates operations – from bookings and ticketing to accounts reconciliation. The company's old paper-based system was labour intensive and sometimes may be subject to data entry errors," says Ms Koh.

The new system has reduced the need for manual input, keeping errors to a minimum. As Ms Koh explains, "It also improves productivity, as our staff can now focus on more value-adding activities, such as closing deals with customers as quickly and efficiently as possible and participating in travel roadshows and events to promote the company's brand."

To ensure it's on the right track, the company seeks feedback from its customers on its new and improved service offerings. "So far, we've received a number of positive comments, and our customers now see us as a trusted and reliable partner," Ms Koh concludes. ■

keytakeaways

- Implementing a good customer service strategy can greatly improve customer experiences.
- To find out how you can embark on service redesign to raise service standards, visit www.spring.gov.sg/CCI.