Moments of Truth (MoT)

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We have been experiencing our individual moments of truth throughout our life. These moments have been cherished or despised according to the experience. Certain moments bring in positive energy and joy only because some objects (or even human beings) have passed such tests of life. Internet friends, for example, as depicted in the beautiful movie called “You’ve Got Mail” (Warner Brothers, 1998), would remain only virtual friends till one personally (physically) meets the person who is on the other side of the terminal. If the so-called friend passes one’s expectation and meets the perceptions, this MoT will bring in joy and happiness; sorrow, disbelief and despair otherwise. Your MoTs have been the days with your toughest papers, your interviews, or the first public speech. Thus a moment of truth might be one’s chance of proving excellence or otherwise. These are the moment when one faces a situation like “do or die”.

The same is correct for an organization (business or otherwise), a brand or an entity. The marketers have been promising many things over the external communication mediums and other publicity channels. Customers too develop certain expectations about the product from their personal needs, past experience of using similar product and also from Word-of-Mouth. According to Bitner and Zeithaml (2000) all these four elements shape the expectation about a product. The moments when the customer approaches to buy/use the product, would be very crucial for the marketers as these might pose lasting impression about the ability of the product to fulfill one’s need.

According to Jan Carlzon, the erstwhile CEO of SAS, the first 15 seconds of the customer’s interaction with the company (in any form) are most crucial in forming perception about the product, especially about a service (like an airline). Thus the people who work in the front-line are those who bear the brunt (or the glory) of making the
company worth trying. This is more important in service industry because the customer cannot have a demonstration of the core service before actually buying it. Thus they will look for cues of judging the quality of services, according to Carlzon, by comparing the behaviour of the front line staff with that of their expectation. For example, a customer may not be interested to continue the call after the first 3 rings, and if a CCP (Customer Contact Person) does not pick the phone within those crucial 3 rings the company is almost sure to loose the customer. Many customers possess a set of alternatives, especially, when dealing with a common service like an airline or a retail store. And hence they would be justifiably “arrogant” not to wait for more positive cues to judge your service. Of course, there are “sweet” customers, but their number is far less than that of the first type. Thus first few seconds of the customers’ interaction with the company are so crucial that these can be called “Moments of Truth”. However, it is an undeniable fact that the truths are susceptible to get revealed throughout the service encounter. A service encounter is “a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with the service” (Shostack, 1985). Thus the service encounter envelopes all aspects of a service firm with which the customer interacts – including its employees and other tangible elements like the physical evidence including the servicescape. According to Normann (1984), Edvardsson (1996) and Edvardsson et al. (2000) all service encounters can be termed as the Moments of Truth. Consequently, it is important to manage and control each and every aspects of the service encounter to get the desired impact.

For goods, tangible and otherwise “demonstratable”, the MoTs are little different, argues Martin Lofgren (2004). According to this author for such products the customer faces two moments of truth. The first one is the packaging of the product, and the second one is the actual use. The use may also be a demonstration of the qualities of the product. The packaging should be such that “the box should send out the message ‘grab me!’ It should be easy to carry and put (it) in the cart” (quote attributed to the Packaging Manager of Procter and Gamble (Lofgren, 2004)). That’s why the packaging can be called the “silent salesman” of the product. The diagram given on the next page (Figure 2) explain the two MoTs.

How to Achieve Positive Moments of Truth:
It is seen that achieving positive moments of truth is of crucial importance for survival in an era of cut throat competition. There are many ways of doing it.

Firstly, the customer expectation should be kept at a level which is deliverable. Unfortunately except for the external communication, other three components are not directly manageable by the company. The company therefore, should be on its toe not to create any over euphoria in the market. The attributes the competitors are offering must be available physically with the service or goods. Likewise, the customer segments must be well defined and wisely selected so that they do not have any over expectation.

Secondly, the CCPs are to be empowered to make a decision on the spot. Carlzon, in SAS had given enough autonomy to the front line staff by “flattening the pyramid”. Thus the CCPs can be selected wisely, be compensated well and be always well trained.
For goods, *thirdly*, the packaging should be such that it is “grabable” by the customer within the first few seconds. Here the “extrinsic cues” (Zeithaml, 1988) must be maintained well. It is found that the customers rely more on these cues, which are product related, but not a part of the physical product itself (brand, size and shape of the package and logo, for examples), as “value signals”. One can consider 3D aspects rather than the traditional 2D ones. Like the size and shape have become ever important to create that “aesthetic” need (Lofgren, 2004).

**Epilogue**

The concept of MoT is often debated as to its practical applicability. Carlzon himself was in the direct line of criticism about the effectiveness of the concept when his airline (SAS) again started to blood substantially from 1990, ironically after the publication of the famous book. Many academicians, therefore, do not want to give any theoretical value to the often repeated phrase, i.e., Moments of Truth (Blois, 1992). According to the skeptics MoTs existence is undoubtedly there, however, may not be in the first few seconds only. The MoTs are there throughout the service encounter and hence any shortsighted measure like “flattening the pyramid” may only back-fire as seen
in case of SAS. In the process of empowering the lower rank of the hierarchy one can plunge into a danger of neglecting the middle level manager, thereby, putting them in great confusion.

However, the term gives the businessman a whole new gamut of looking at how customers perceive a product (specially the service), and how quickly then can form an opinion about it. Thus one cannot afford to lose those first few seconds, when chances are there that the CCPs would be taken off guard by the sudden arrival of the Moments of Truth.

Let there be positive and beautiful Moments of Truth for all, each time and every time for all!

Reference


Edvardsson, B. (1996), Kvalitet Och Tjänsteutveckling, Studentlitteratur, Lund (*in Swedish*).


