

# Beyond sales: breeding loyalty with better customer service

*Selling the right product is just the start of the relationship between the brands in Ali Group and their customers. After-sales service is a central pillar of the Group-wide strategy where the emphasis on customer satisfaction goes far beyond the point of sale, global after-sales director **Matteo Zironi** tells Jim Banks*

The sale of equipment is the beginning of the relationship with the customer, not the end. In an ideal world, customers want to be able to forget about the equipment they buy because it works perfectly and becomes a seamless part of an efficient operation, but problems do inevitably arise even with the most reliable products, and it is the speed of response and willingness to provide support that is the key to loyalty. That is why it is important to **make after-sales service a top priority**. It is easy to switch to another manufacturer, but it is hard to replace a valued service provider.

For Ali Group, service is the source of sustainable competitive advantage because customers want more than simply high-performance equipment. That is why there is a tangible shift from focusing purely on products to providing a rounded service – a process termed ‘servitization’ – across the foodservice industry, and this trend is driving a process of transformation within Ali Group. “After-sales service is an essential part of our strategy and we are moving on from selling good products, which in itself is no longer enough,” says Matteo Zironi, global after-sales director at Ali Group. “We have to provide excellent customer

service after the sale, which means the focus is no longer on products but on solutions.” “Customers’ expectations of after-sales service have increased dramatically and there has been a shift from providing technical assistance and supplying spare parts in an efficient way to providing broader solutions for the whole product lifecycle.

**“The overall aim is to help customers become more productive, improve profitability and make savings on operational costs”**

We will always be looking to improve delivery times for spare parts, but a solution should include elements such as accessories, extended warranties and maintenance contracts, and even practical business ideas to help reduce operational costs and improve clients’ efficiency.”



Ali Group's Matteo Zironi works closely with the service and spare parts teams to further develop the after-sales business within the Group



Clients want more than just high-performance equipment; they expect broader solutions throughout the whole product lifecycle



Zironi, whose background is in engineering and economics, previously worked in the industrial sector in companies that are well-known for their strength in service and after-sales support, including General Electric, Toyota and Whirlpool. With this experience in companies where customer service is a fundamental part of the business proposition, he is well placed to ensure that Ali Group strengthens their offering and continues to remain a leading light in both technical support and after-sales service. The challenge all of the service teams face is to ensure that there is a consistent focus on customer satisfaction across the Group's many brands, and this means further developing the mindset across the network of after-sales centers and distributors that support end-customers of Ali Group's brands. It is a cultural shift that will ensure constant improvement in the full aftermarket product range, from the supply of genuine parts to service contracts and wider business partnerships. The transformation is from technical support to a commercial function.

#### A new way of thinking

Zironi knows that a culture of service cannot evolve overnight, but he believes that strengthening the right attitude in each of Ali Group's companies can quickly lead to meaningful change.

**"A change in mindset is needed,** with after-sales operations moving from technical departments to become commercially minded departments. Looking at products and service together requires a more proactive approach. It means reaching out to customers rather than waiting for them to contact us. We should be there **to optimize the operations of our clients,** not just provide them with the products they need. We are there to help them build their business and to provide them with peace of mind," he says. "We can help them to optimize their equipment to support them in developing their business operations, which might mean providing reports on energy consumption, advise on spending control or possible improvements in their use of equipment. The service department has to act like the minister for foreign affairs in a company, because it deals directly with customer relationships and ensures that operations run smoothly. It is, therefore, the platform for building loyalty." The specifics of service delivery must be tailored to each individual company and will depend on the type of equipment each one supplies, but the broad principles of being proactive and providing appropriate solutions to support clients in developing their business apply equally to all. "Service should be seen as a business unit in its own right, and that business unit must have a

commercial approach. It must have a mission to be economically active as part of the company. Each of our companies is at a different stage of maturity in terms of developing that commercial approach to service, but all of them understand the concept," Zironi explains. The basics of customer service, such as ensuring spare parts are always in stock, remain a top priority, but a more focused approach to after-sales capability means looking beyond spare parts inventory planning to ensure prompt technical support for service partners and close collaboration with everyone involved in the

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distribution network to guarantee top class service. "In terms of development and education we also put a lot of emphasis on training and certifying the service network, as well as the skills needed to move from classic technical training to a more commercial mindset that informs the delivery of solutions. So, we have technical and developmental programs, which include technical courses that support assistance and after-sales centers in being more proactive in managing relationships with customers," Zironi notes.

#### Making the change

Making meaningful change in the quality of after-sales service begins with understanding the starting point, so it is essential to have the right measures in place to track improvements. Ali Group has chosen a series of **customer-driven key performance indicators** (KPIs), rather than internal measures. "Measuring the quality of customer service is done partly with financial measures, but we also extensively use KPIs that relate to service delivery," says Zironi. "We measure what the customer sees, so we look at spare parts availability and the time taken to resolve problems. I've been in the B2C market, which stresses the concept of customer intimacy, so I have learnt the lesson that customers can change their minds if the service they receive is not good enough, which is why it is important to

Each brand within Ali Group wants to be more a partner than a supplier: helping clients build their business



measure the quality of customer service and constantly work to improve it."

Ali Group has made a firm commitment to become a champion of after-sales service and is making a concerted effort to build up key capabilities in service, parts supply and field operations to accelerate the move from a product-centric view of its business to a **customer-centric business model**. The overall aim is to help customers become more productive, improve profitability and make savings on operational costs. The Group's mentality is one of continuous improvement, and maintaining a high level of enthusiasm for the change is essential. Zironi sees a great commitment from within the Group to the cause of strong after-sales service. "The transformation is proceeding very well. The Group has the right people and vision in place and we see great movement in our initiative for change. Service is changing from a support function into a strategic pillar. We work extensively with the companies in the Group and we can see that everyone is very motivated," he remarks. Customers of Ali Group companies can expect an even more proactive and supportive relationship in the future, as each brand becomes more of a partner rather than just a supplier. The Group has set itself on the road to enhanced after-sales service and there is no turning back.