

A NEW ERA DAWNS FOR SOCAP IN EUROPE

Steve Hurst talks with SOCAPIE's new chairman **Angie Court** about her innovative plans for the future of this highly respected membership body for customer service professionals - which also has a new chief executive and director of training

You took over as chairman of Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Europe (SOCAPIE) late last year Angie - what are the key priorities for you in your time at the helm?

My first priority was to breathe more life into the organisation again for its current members. I am a strong believer in loyalty and recommendation. By offering a variety of events and networking opportunities to the customer service community which provide the support network for each other, I feel that their success will enhance the current membership and naturally provide the positive word of mouth that we need to grow. I valued such events from my early days in customer service - the friends I met then I still have and we still share those moments where you need a friend but can't always find those 'fellow freaks' in your own organisation. These relationships provide the foundation you need to feel strong in your beliefs in doing the right thing for your customers. In addition we have voted in a new CEO, Andrew MacPherson, taking over from outgoing CEO Derek Williams, and Andrew, who is a very experienced practitioner in customer service, is already working closely with me to enhance our offerings and provide the professionalism we need. You will hear more from Andrew shortly.

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This is the 21st anniversary of SOCAP - how will you celebrate the organisation's 'coming of age'?

We have a fabulous opportunity this year at the conference being held in the Tower of London on October 4 and 5. We have already secured customer service guru Don Peppers as a keynote speaker with many more strong and varied speakers to be announced. Look out for the new website www.socapie.eu and see what we will be doing.

Tell us a bit about the Heritage Document you are working on

This is a document recording our values and beliefs as laid down in thought and deed back in 1986 by the founders of SOCAP. In all organisations you need to know your roots and this is exactly that - the passions and purpose for setting up SOCAP then are exactly the same reason for keeping it going now.

SOCAP has strong European connections through SOCAPIE - how do you envisage the organisation developing throughout Europe in the future?

I think we need to develop this with the local people by embracing our cultural differences. There are other local customer service networking organisations which we can join in with too and support members in a more Pan European way rather than replace with another SOCAP. An example of this is GRESK which one of our French Board members belongs to and the learnings from this membership are shared with other SOCAPIE members within their own French Chapter of SOCAPIE. This is really working out well and I am encouraged by the enthusiasm of other country members for this method of expansion. Not everyone speaks English and the cultures are fabulously different so I strongly believe that you should never try to suppress these differences. Britain doesn't have all the answers and our strength in SOCAPIE is the way we have embraced and encouraged these valuable differences. Don't forget SOCAP is unique in that it is a truly global network, something I know Andrew MacPherson is already discussing re-enforcing with international

colleagues. We're also always on the lookout for representation in new territories.

Membership organisations have been suffering of late, how has this affected SOCAPIE ?

Members will change as jobs and companies change too and we also need to change to reflect that. The changes we have just made with a new CEO in Andrew MacPherson and the appointment of a Director of Training in Kathy Stiff, another long standing member sharing our same values, do help us to stay fresh in our focus. And we are able to offer additional services to members in the manner of networking events and in house training that takes account of the operational challenges members face.

Where would you like to see SOCAPIE in two years from now ?

Being known as THE membership organisation that current members continue to recommend to new Customer Service Managers and Consumer Affairs Professionals because of the friends they have met at other customer service events and say what a friendly, warm, supportive organisation it is. I would love people to choose to give up a day at work to attend one of the events because they really want to come and share with others to help each other deliver excellent service to their customers and consumers.


Finally Angie what do you think are the biggest challenges facing Consumer Affairs Professionals in the world of customer management today?

The first challenge has got to be TIME rather than a lack of enthusiasm or availability of research. Often we know exactly what we want to do in order to achieve the very best in customer excellence delivery and recovery, but putting our head up and saying stop to the day job is difficult.

My experience in customer service has been that just about everything comes to you and not necessarily work that is your responsibility! It's simply that other people just have the trust in you that you will know or find out what to do to get a solution for them. That's what comes from being friendly and open and really that's part of our role anyway. But these extras take up the time we would want to further our aims and widen our stance in the customer management world outside of our 'day jobs'.

Another challenge is identity. What exactly is a 'Consumer Affairs Professional' anyway, that makes he or she different from a Customer Service Manager, Customer Excellence Director or the more exotic titles like, Customer Experience Director, Director of Wow?

Maybe it's strategic high level thinking versus the doing and carrying out of instructions with personality? More importantly, is there a difference when the customer is the centre of things anyway? 'Consumer Affairs Professional' is an all encompassing and all embracing title for a group of people.

In SOCAPIE we accept all titles as long as the holder of the title has the customer/consumers' experience/complete interest at the front of their minds. Then we can share together no matter what actual role they carry out in their day to day jobs. The resulting extra confidence gives us the strength to make the time to achieve those extra special ideas and dreams. 



EMPLOYEE FORUMS - THE IDEAS FACTORY

Judith Leary-Joyce shows how get the best mileage out of Employee Forums

THE IDEA OF 'EMPLOYEE forum' is much more than a requirement to keep people up dated on business changes. Forget the formal title and think of the opportunity to discuss issues and concerns with informed and interested people and you begin to see the relevance.

Front line employees know so much about the business and the customer that not talking to them at regular intervals is a serious business omission. Each day, someone will have a great idea about how to deliver a better service and if managers and leaders are not listening, everyone loses out.

LEADERSHIP ATTITUDE

As a leader or manager in the business you need to believe in the value your employees can bring. They are committed to the success of the business too - after all, their livelihoods depend on it, so begin now to treat them as responsible adults.

There is a dual role to the concept of forum - to hand on information that concerns employees so they know what is happening and what to expect in the future. It is also important to pick their brains on new ideas. Loads of ideas can look good when sitting in the corner office. Try them out in the middle of a busy call centre and the view may be totally different. Employees are the ones who can help define which ideas are positive and which need to be put in the bin.

EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE

As an employee involved in forum discussion, you have to think through your role and how you want to play it. The approach you take will determine how seriously you are taken. Generally big picture thinking won't be your job and unless you are really keen on it, it's unlikely you'll do it automatically. So when you put forward ideas, take a moment to think about the impact it would have on the rest of the business - will it help everyone or just be an additional burden or problem.

David had a friend in a big city business who was given an interest free loan for his travel card each year. David thought this was a great idea and decided to suggest to his company - after all buying an annual ticket would save money. True enough - that would be a real perk. But he forgot to think of it from the business perspective. A reasonable expectation from a big bank, it would be a killer move in the small business he worked in.

NURTURING THE RELATIONSHIP

For this sharing of information and ideas to work well there has to be a respectful and trusting relationship. When an employee puts forward an idea that shows an apparent lack of concern for the business it will reduce credibility. And managers who fail to listen and make quick judgements

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will soon face sullen faces and resentment.

For managers the task is to listen with respect and help the development of understanding. David truly believed he had a good idea. He was not out to do the company - he just hadn't thought it through. The ideal response is to help him understand the implications for the wider business - support a rigorous conversation about the pro's and con's once and the person learns how to think differently in the future.

Employees learn a lot from the experience of putting their own situation into the business context. But don't just roll over. Many great ideas have come from front line employees. So engage in the debate with an open mind, challenge thinking - yours and others - and you'll soon have a win on your hands.

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