



CUSTOMER KINGS

Who puts their customers first? Who goes the extra mile and lavishes their clientele with care? Who deserves to be known as a Customer King? We decided to find out.

www.realbusiness.co.uk/customer-kings

REALBUSINESS



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Crowning the **Kings**

Entrepreneurs love to say the customer is king. But do they mean it? When pushed, can they produce cold, hard evidence of their slavish devotion to the monarch?

Real Business and Cisco decided to find out who really deserves the epithet, Customer King. We wanted to discover who goes the extra mile to create a truly memorable customer experience.

We put the word out on the street that we wanted to hear from firms who believed they deserved recognition. The response was terrific – there's no shortage of firms who believe they know how to dazzle and delight their clientele.

In order to objectively select the best entries, we assembled a judging panel: Denys Shortt is an entrepreneur of the very highest calibre. His firm, DCS Europe, is Stratford-upon-Avon's biggest firm – employing more than 200 people – with sales in excess of £100m. Shortt has won just about every entrepreneurial award there is to win and was shortlisted for a Growing Business Award in 2008. He was joined by Cisco UK and Ireland channel head Bernadette Wightman, a woman with a deep understanding of how technology can be harnessed to transform the way companies interact with clients. *Real Business* was represented by myself.

We looked for innovation, ingenuity and imagination in the entries and, above all, we wanted to see concrete proof that the techniques resulted in improved customer engagement. Without evidence, you have no idea how your clients rate you.

Eight winners and eight highly commended firms emerged. As they prove, the standard for outstanding service is rising all the time. If you aren't constantly fighting to improve – and measuring your performance – you're falling behind. We hope the insights provided give you inspiration to take your own firm's performance to the next level.

Charles Orton-Jones

PPA Business journalist of the year 2006

A taste for travel: Black Tomato trio James Merrett (left), Tom Marchant (centre) and Matt Smith (right) are spicing up the travel industry





WINNER

BLACK TOMATO

The travel agency industry has been turned on its head in the past decade. Cut-throat internet agencies have sprung from nothing to dominate the industry. Online forums provide frank advice on where to stay and where to avoid. What place is there for an old-fashioned agency?

Black Tomato seems to have found the answer. At first glance, it looks like an online travel agency. You can browse online through thousands of holidays – from Brazil to Botswana. And then you start noticing a few oddities. For starters, you can't book online. Why? Well, the holidays are unique. The only way to get the most out of a Black Tomato trip is to have a chat with a consultant who will ensure you have everything the way you want it. And what trips! Take Antarctica. Black Tomato doesn't just offer the bog-standard arrive and stare holiday. Think kitesurfing off glaciers, a night in a replica of Scott's legendary camp and flights over the wilderness in a DC-3.

Every one of Black Tomato's packages is wildly different from the usual fare – so much so, it seems unjust to use the word "holiday". In Brazil, Black Tomato can take you into the jungle *primaeval* to hunt anaconda in piranha-infested waters. The pilgrimage to Petra in Jordan achieves an authentic feel to satisfy penitent believers; the skydiving package drops you over Mount Everest. Black

Tomato backs up these wonderful experiences with exceptional customer support. Black Tomato TV broadcasts video travel guides created by staff. By strict policy, the firm only offers packages which its staff have personally vetted (not a bad perk for employees). Undecided browsers can use an ideas generator, specifying their pulse, perspiration and patience levels. Need something urgently? Customers can hit a panic button to be put in touch with Black Tomato's last-minute team.

Needless to say the founders, twenty-something, ex-City boys Matt Smith, Tom Marchant and James Merrett, are all devoted travellers. Between them, they've explored every continent and continue to combine running the firm with ongoing research.

Their desire to build a bond with customers is evident. Holiday-makers are sent complimentary books and CDs. When they return, a personalised "Back to Reality" goodie pack awaits as the antidote to the depressing first day back. All customers become members of The Vine, its travel club complete with perks such as airport lounge access, classic car hire and free photo books.

Founded in 2005, Black Tomato has already won a slew of awards, including the *Guardian's* Best Travel Website in 2006 and 2007. We can see why!

HIGHLY COMMENDED

A SUIT THAT FITS

Jermyn Street and the high street are a galaxy apart. One has perfect customisation and lugubrious service, proffered by craftsmen of the highest taste. The other is a rugby scrum of shoppers desperately trying to find garments in the right size.

Warren Bennett's website ASuitThatFits.com is an ambitious attempt to bridge that gap. As the world's first online bespoke suit-making company, the site offers hand-tailored threads at high-street prices.

The heart of his service is the online Suit Wizard. This walks customers through the suit creation process from fabric selection, button types, the cut of the collar, jacket vents and pocket designs, to the pleating of the trousers, etc. Bennett has added Web 2.0 functionality, so customers can see other popular designs, read reviews of suits and view photos of previous customers in their finery. You don't get that on Jermyn Street.

Each suit is made to order in Nepal, which is why Bennett can charge £150 for a two-piece, 100 per cent wool, navy suit. The only offline interaction is the initial measurement, although customers are free to measure themselves.

The web-based Suit Wizard model is an undoubted hit: A Suit That Fits has 15,000 registered members, doubling every six months. No mystery, really, with 40 billion suit combinations on offer and prices one-tenth of Jermyn Street.

**PRICES
AT A SUIT
THAT FITS
ARE ONE-
TENTH OF
JERMYN
STREET**

Pushing the right buttons:
Co-founders of IT firm
Conosco, Max Mlinaric and Ben
Gladstone (left and far right)
and senior account manager,
Shoaib Laher (centre).

WINNER

CONOSCO

It takes a brave soul to admit he's wrong. Ben Gladstone is the co-founder of Conosco, which provides outsourced IT support to small and mid-sized firms in London. Last year, he took a long hard look at the way Conosco was delivering customer support and concluded an improvement was needed sharpish.

"Customers weren't getting the best possible service. The same problems were recurring, causing unnecessary downtime and we weren't doing anything systematic or rigorous to prevent them. We were also failing to make customers' systems really meet their needs - we were guessing what their employees and businesses needed, instead of questioning and listening to them."

He examined the processes of the large corporates, studied the government's ITIL best practice guides and talked to his employees, encouraging them to come up with a four-step overhaul.

The first step was a CRM system. "The most direct channel is to ask for feedback when we fix a problem - and to act on it. We customised our NetSuite CRM system to include a feedback form with every case closed. If the feedback is bad, we call the customer straight back, find out the complaint and resolve it.

"Next, we worked on preventing problems and downtime. We use low feedback scores from closed cases to change the way we do things and correct poor setups. We have a

range of remote management tools adapted from large enterprises to audit each computer every day and detect and fix any early warnings or actual problems before they affect our customers. We also promoted a support team leader in charge of monitoring the closed cases to find patterns of repetitive faults that might signify a deeper problem."

The third step was to chat to clients. Instead of talking solely about problems, Conosco now issues "IT wishlists", so clients can discuss what technology could be doing for them.

"The final channel - for now - is to make our systems meet the needs of our customers' businesses. Again, we used to talk to our main contacts but





HIGHLY COMMENDED

ANS GROUP

Quick feedback is great, but there's no substitute for seriously in-depth research. ANS Group supplies hardware and software to businesses, and is a firm prepared to obtain lengthy customer service reports from clients.

"The development that's had the greatest effect on our service is the implementation of a detailed questionnaire that we send out to IT directors of all our clients," explains MD, Paul Sweeney. "Each survey takes between 20 and 30 minutes to complete, so gathering responses is a considerable task for our relatively small marketing team. We contact each IT director individually, asking them to be completely honest. Frustratingly, our customer focus means that many of our respondents want to give us positive feedback; but we rely on gathering frank, detailed information on how we can improve.

"We've developed a generic customer survey that we send to customers, including Microsoft, VMWare, Hitachi and Novell. As a result, our customer service has been brought up to a whole new level."

IT suppliers rely heavily on proving their competence, and these surveys have won ANS a Cisco Gold Certification and a Cisco star for outstanding customer service. "We have the evidence that our customers love what we are doing: our measure of satisfaction runs at 4.8 out of five, compared to an average among other Cisco Gold Partners of 4.3 out of five."

we were missing things, so we've created formal strategic reviews, with templated questionnaires, where we ask about their future business plans, growth, changes, etc. From this information, and our analysis of their systems performance, we can draw up a technical roadmap and budget."

Did the review work? "New business from referrals has doubled,

contributing to our growth of 36 per cent last year. Since then, our customer relations are such that we're holding onto clients even in the face of recent cut-throat underbidding by our competitors. Probably related to these improved relationships, our employees are staying much longer - which further improves our service."

Mission accomplished.



WINNER

DAIRY DIRECT

Hard sell often means no sell. When Ken Jordan and Laura Phipers set up Dairy Direct in 2001, they thought an aggressive attitude would help them conquer the old-fashioned animal feed supplement market. Dairy farmers still bought their feed supplements from “the good old merchants rep, trundling round in his Ford Mondeo, picking up orders over a cup of coffee round the kitchen table”. Dairy Direct planned to hit farmers with modern sales techniques. “The investment was minimal,” Jordan recalls. “We would spend about £500 on a few phone lines, recruit some sweet talking females and freshen up the Portacabins with a coat of paint. Give us a couple of years and we’d clean up.

“The reality check came pretty soon. Farmers in Devon were not used to getting marketing calls – they just didn’t do business in that way. Our telesales team soon became disillusioned and demotivated. Time to regroup.”

The relaunch combined a new sales approach with technology. Staff were sent on a training course, funded by Business Link grants, and customer relationship manager package, ACT, was installed. Jordan and Phipers segmented the market, identifying farmers under 40 as more receptive to their new marketing approach.

“Each team member was allocated a sales territory, which they would

personally manage. The strategy was to build relationships with our customers and prospects, rather than banging out 20 calls an hour and hoping to score every now and again. Introductory mailings were sent out, then followed up five to seven days later. ACT was at the heart of this strategy. It enabled us to record all actions, mailings and conversations, thus building up a profile of our customers and prospects. The whole idea was that 98 per cent of all calls would be wrapped up in one go – none of this ‘I’m not sure, I’ll have to get someone to call you back.’”

Each salesperson was made responsible for their own profit centre. Middle-management became redundant.

The hard-sell was ditched. “It took, on average, three or four calls before we secured an order from a prospect. Farmers are inherently conservative in their buying habits so it really is a question of developing trust. If we promised next-day delivery, our haulier had to deliver. No ifs, no buts.”

This customer-first model has transformed Dairy Direct’s income. This year, turnover will nudge £5m. Of a customer base of 800 dairy and beef farmers, more than 40 per cent have traded with Dairy Direct for four years or more.

Jordan’s new philosophy is simple: “Happy customers mean happy suppliers, mean happy employees, mean happy me.”

**WE
WANTED
TO WRAP
UP 98% OF
CALLS IN
ONE GO**

HIGHLY COMMENDED

ASPECT MAINTENANCE

Mobile technology can radically improve the capability of roving service staff. Aspect Maintenance provides property maintenance to domestic and commercial sectors, fixing roofs, unblocking drains and everything in between. This means workers spend a considerable amount of time away from the HQ. Clients include Ladbrokes, Strada Restaurants and wine merchant Corney & Barrow. In order to ensure its agents have instant access to inventory, job slots, the location of other agents and customer accounts, it adopted PDA-based job management system Siclops. In conjunction, Aspect introduced a digital pen-and-paper technology so on-the-spot quotes can be sketched out and sent using Bluetooth, via a Blackberry, to the back office to be typed up and emailed to the client’s inbox. The process takes minutes, replacing the old system whereby the agent would need to return to the HQ and physically hand over quotes to secretarial staff.

The use of GPS trackers by field agents means Aspect can offer industry-leading two-hour appointment windows, and clients can be told exactly where their agent is at any given moment. Facilities maintenance may not be the sexiest trade, but managing director William Davies says there’s no reason it can’t use cutting-edge technology: “We are here to change the norm.”

Putting hard sell telesales to pasture:
Dairy Direct duo Ken Jordan (left)
and Laura Phypers (right) have turned
the animal-feed market on its head



A lot of bottle: Marcus Waley-Cohen (left) and Harry Briggs (right), the brains behind Firefly Tonics, are giving the drinks industry an energy boost

WINNER

FIREFLY TONICS

The drinks industry is a tough one, dominated by giants such as PepsiCo, Diageo and Coca-Cola. So how does a tiny London-based start-up get noticed?

Firefly Tonics founders Harry Briggs and Marcus Waley-Cohen have two USPs. The first is the quasi-medical properties of their drink; ingredients such as echinacea and buckthorn boost the immune system. The second is their strategy to build an army of loyal quaffers through personal interaction.

Look at the photo on a Firefly bottle. A stock image? Not on your life. "We encourage customers to send us photos, which they upload onto our website," explains Briggs. "Every month we pick a photo of the month, which goes on our homepage. We send the winners cases of our drinks. Every three months, we change all the photos on our bottles using those customers have sent us. In 2008 customers uploaded more than 1,000 photos."

Briggs says the payback is threefold: "We get more engagement with the Firefly product - in picking a 'wake up' or 'chill out' photo, people are implicitly thinking about what the drink does for them.

"Most of the people who visit our site to upload a photo also find out more about the company, and the majority sign up to our newsletter.

"The process creates an improved product: because we can now change the photos on the front of our bottles

every three months, our drinks are frequently being given a dose of new energy."

The campaign is linked to Firefly's online strategy. Again, interactivity is the key. "Since Firefly started, we have asked friends for advice on how we can improve. Now we have a database

of over 6,000 people who have signed up to join our newsletter. We were startled to find that, when we send people our regular news, the proportion of people clicking through to a story was around 25 per cent. However, when we ask people for help, the response rate soars to 35 per cent.





“We recently asked people to complete a simple five-minute survey, which included metrics such as our Net Promoter Score. To our astonishment, over 1,300 people completed the survey.” To show their appreciation, Briggs and Waley-Cohen responded to every comment

personally – 600 emails in total.

This personal interaction gives Firefly an enviable edge, demonstrated by its Net Promoter Score (calculated by subtracting the percentage of customers rating the product one to six out of ten from those rating it nine to ten) of +35.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

CAXTON FX

Currency broking is a brutally competitive industry, with clients flocking to whoever offers the best rates. Caxton FX is thriving by not only competing on rates, but providing impressive levels of service. With the opening of an office in Melbourne, it can execute transactions around the clock, six days a week. It refuses to pay account managers commission to avoid hard selling. With no diversification it can provide more knowledgeable advice than high-street banks who dabble in every financial service. And it has launched an eye-catching new product to differentiate it from other FX houses: a pre-paid cash card for use abroad.

You load the card up with cash via the internet or by text message and then are free to spend euros on the Continent without incurring the often painfully high fees charged on normal credit cards. Since Caxton FX is a specialist currency dealer, you can also avoid being gouged on the exchange rate. The card is free and no fees apply – one suspects Caxton FX is offering it as a clever piece of marketing rather than for its money-spinning potential. Chief executive Rupert Lee-Browne, who founded Caxton FX in 2001, says: “Consumers now recognise that using a Caxton Currency card on their travels can save them big sums over travel cash or their bank card. We predict the demise of travel cash within five years.”

WINNER

INSTYLE FITNESS

Gyms have a problem. Their clientele often don't actually like, er, exercising. They may love the steam rooms, coffee bars and free shampoo in the showers but, when it comes to pushing tin, the air is thick with apathetic groans. The result is infrequent attendance leading to eventual cancellation of membership. For the gym industry, it's a matter of profit and loss.

Some gyms try to amuse their weary punters with gigantic plasma screens broadcasting music videos 24 hours a day. Others try novelty classes such as quasi-martial arts aerobics classes ("Work those glutes! Form the praying mantis!").

Duncan Lawson offers a saner alternative. His Instyle Fitness gym kit is internet-connected to allow users to work out with their friends, no matter where in the world they might be.

The Instyle S2 exercise bike is fitted with a 17-inch monitor displaying a computer-game style simulation of a bike race. Other riders whiz by; the wheel resistance increases as you head uphill and eases when you freewheel down; the handlebars swivel to steer. You can even move through 18 gears, just like on a normal road bike. The presence of other riders in the simulation provides a psychological component, which other exercise bikes can't offer. You can create a pace-setter to push you. You can race other S2 riders on the same track. A "ghost rider" function allows you to see how you performed





Working the uphill: Duncan Lawson of Instyle Fitness offers less-than-enthusiastic gym-goers a fresh, fun alternative to the traditional exercise bike

previously on the simulated track so you can race your former self, upping the ante every time you cycle the same simulated track.

When you are finished, all data is sent to a personalised web-page so you can monitor results over time.

Lawson explains: "Whether it's friendly rivalry between mates or racing against an MP - there are networked bikes in the gym at the Houses of Parliament - users have the chance to engage socially and mentally with their exercise routine."

For ambitious exercisers, Instyle runs international competitions. "Users can compare their fitness with other gym-goers around the world," says Lawson. "Running the competition helps Instyle Fitness, and their customers, build up a user community and maintain interest in the machines through competition and social interaction."

Because the machines are networked, Lawson can remotely update the bikes to add new simulated terrains - no need for engineers to visit gyms. Friends can meet up for a virtual ride on new routes with scenic countryside, regardless of where they work out.

Lawson produces ample evidence that the networked S2 machine is changing the way gym-goers think about exercise: 86 per cent prefer the S2 to stationary bikes; and 65 per cent prefer using it to watching TV. Repeat usage is over 90 per cent.

There's still no gain without pain at the gym but, thanks to Lawson, boredom's much less of a factor.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

IRIS

Iris PROJECTminder is a software suite for architects, engineers and management to organise projects. Iris reckons it's created a powerful package, demonstrated by the fact that one in five of the 100 biggest architect practices uses it. But PROJECTminder is so function-rich that Iris was concerned users might not use every module. The solution?

Iris constantly monitors usage to discover which features are being neglected. If it believes the customer would benefit from tuition, contact is made to offer support. and to demonstrate hidden capabilities.

PROJECTminder is delivered over the web as Software as a Service (SaaS), so the monitoring doesn't penetrate clients' proprietary networks. The technique is particularly effective with SaaS, as new functionality is constantly being added, making it hard for clients to keep up.

Iris's other major product is payroll and HR software for small to medium-sized firms. Customer support has been radically overhauled, resulting in increased head count and advanced training of all staff. Client retention rates are 85 per cent against a sector average of 60 per cent.

With 30,000 clients, you might expect a few complaints: Iris receives none. Instead, it tallies compliments - on average 60 per month. Beat that!

IRIS GETS 60 COMPLIMENTS FROM CUSTOMERS A MONTH



Perfect ten: Alex Cheatle's lifestyle concierge company, Ten UK, gets top marks for managing the manic social schedules of the money-rich and time-poor

WINNER

TEN UK

If you think your customers are demanding, then take a look at lifestyle concierge, Ten UK. Its clients are high-powered entrepreneurs, sports stars and executives who use the service to find sold-out concert

tickets, book restaurant tables when the *maitre d'* says *c'est impossible*, and generally ensure their lives run without a hitch. It receives 10,000 requests from members each month, every one of which must be fulfilled above and beyond expectations.

To deliver consistently brilliant service, Ten UK founder Alex Cheatle has developed a fascinating back-room infrastructure. The most basic

feature is a request database to ensure that Ten UK learns from every transaction.

"We use proprietary knowledge management technology and processes to 'learn by doing,'" reveals Cheatle. "For example, the first time Ten UK recommended a reliable electrician in Leeds for a private member, it took hours. But the second time, the cost of



providing a good answer is much lower. All previous information is stored, searchable, reusable and can be communicated to the member electronically through any channel. Any further work or feedback on that answer makes it even richer."

Cheatle ensures his salary structure is geared towards good service. "Our employees don't have sales or commission targets. As part

of our new induction, our staff 'unlearn' sales-driven behaviour to focus solely on customer needs. Ten UK staff do not manage requests, they build relationships. Staff are rewarded for intuition and flagging up queries if they sense that a customer is not completely satisfied, even if it is only a hunch. When this occurs, we investigate the situation to ensure we rectify it and learn from it. Staff that do this are recognised and rewarded for it. We don't shoot the messenger! The result of this is highlighted by a recent customer survey - 98 per cent of Ten UK members felt that our staff do "the right thing'."

To put the customer at the heart of every business decision, Cheatle has created "member chairs". He explains: "We have four people at all times who are the living, breathing 'voices of the customer' throughout Ten UK. They scrutinise every metric of member satisfaction, monitoring customer care and praise emails and calls, and feeding back directly to lifestyle managers. A member chair attends every decision-making meeting to represent the interest of customers and has the right of veto."

The impact is measurable: phones are answered in 15 seconds; request response times are down from six hours to three; and independent research shows 99 per cent of clients are either "very" or "fairly" satisfied, leading to client retention of 100 per cent for corporate customers.

The result? Ten UK expects to post a profit of £1m on turnover of £15m this year, double last year's amount.



HIGHLY COMMENDED

PROSYN

If reading Customer Kings is giving you ideas on how to improve service in your firm, then Roy Castleman has some last-minute advice for you.

He is the entrepreneur behind Prosyn, a fast-growing IT-support provider for SMEs, and his tip is: outsource. He explains Prosyn's approach: "To continue improving the overall experience of dealing with Prosyn, we feel it is essential to request regular customer feedback. However, we were concerned that conducting our own satisfaction surveys would fail to paint a true picture because of the close personal ties we form with our customers. So we employ an external marketing company, with specialist knowledge of the IT sector, to manage this task for us." To analyse Prosyn's systems, Castleman commissioned an external company to draw up a process flowchart. A separate agency writes a regular newsletter to keep clients up to date with relevant developments in IT. Training needs are analysed and conducted by outside experts, too.

The result is an exceptionally clear image of how Prosyn is performing. Castleman combines these insights with a strong service infrastructure, based on Sage CRM, to keep clients sweet. In the past three years, only one client has cancelled a contract and 90 per cent of clients say they are happy to recommend Prosyn.

WINNER

ANYJUNK

In 2005, *Real Business* profiled an ambitious young man named Jason Mohr. He had big plans for his waste disposal start-up, AnyJunk. With his fire-engine-red trucks and smart liveried workmen, Mohr said he was reinventing the waste business and his business would be a household name by 2010. He had another mission, too. A former investment banker with NM Rothschild, Mohr had left the "soul destroying" rat race and wanted his new business to be good for society, colourful and as delightful to passers-by as to customers.

Well, AnyJunk's not yet a household name but Mohr has delivered on his promise to add the gaiety of life. And he's got a new string to his bow: an environmental analysis service to help clients improve their recycling rates.

"We do three things to brighten our clients' lives," he reports. "All of our trucks have external speakers fitted that are linked to the in-cab stereo. Depending on the time of year we play music to suit the mood. Not everyday, mind - the drivers would go mad! At Christmas time we play carols, Valentine's Day we play love songs, sunny days we play summertime songs, and on rainy mornings, we play tunes like Singing in the Rain. Kids particularly seem to love it, but you'd be equally amazed at the

amount of people in the street who turn to smile when we drive by. The idea was inspired by the old 'any old iron' cry of the rag and bone man, ice cream vans and the emergency service sirens."

He works hard to find out if his service is up to scratch. "We send out an automated follow-up email to all infrequent customers, using their first name, the day after the collection asking for feedback. Customers really seem to appreciate the effort of doing it and it's a great way of getting back testimonials. We literally have thousands - a selection can be seen on our website."

And he supplies useful data to clients. "We recently started offering our larger commercial customers detailed weight and volume data on the waste we clear, having installed onboard weighing equipment on our new trucks. The data is available for each collection and also in a monthly spreadsheet format. Clients have a robust waste audit trail, so they can identify ways of saving money and reducing landfill. As far as we are aware, no other clearance company is offering this service, and the onboard weighing pitch has definitely helped us win clients such as B&Q, Body Shop, and Amey."

Mohr has proved that, no matter what trade you are in, it is possible to bring song and sunshine to the world. Frankly, if binmen can put a smile on clients' faces, anyone can.

WHERE ELSE CAN YOU GET AN OPINION ON NIGHT LIGHTS AT 3AM?

HIGHLY COMMENDED

ROOMS YOU LOVE

As professional working mothers, Lesley Ferguson and Gillian Forrest understand their clients perfectly. Their two-year-old online retailer, Rooms You Love, sources furniture for children's bedrooms and, because the pair know from experience how hard it is for parents to find time to search for cots, wallpaper, wardrobes and curtains, they've made their service as accommodating as possible.

The key feature is a telephone advice line that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Parents have limited flexibility so, at the end of the working day, calls to Rooms You Love are transferred to a "night service", where customers can get queries answered instantly. Where else can you get an opinion on night lights at 3am on a Sunday morning?

For the seriously time-pushed, Rooms You Love offers a catalogue of finished rooms, and the site incorporates a "recommend" feature to help buyers discover which items go best together.

The firm has a plethora of testimonials to show just how much parents value their can-do attitude. When an American customer called in a panic looking for tables and chairs, the pair liaised directly with the US supplier to get the goods to their destination in double-quick time.

This deluge of compliments and frequency of repeat sales suggest that Ferguson and Forrest have found the right formula for satisfying a notoriously tricky clientele.



WINNER

COUGAR

The first clue that Cougar Automation is a mould-breaker is the fact that the boss, Clive Hutchinson, is company leader, not MD. "I don't manage and I don't direct," he says. He's deadly serious: this is a firm that creates industry-topping service by allowing employees extraordinary levels of freedom.

"Cats", as Cougar employees call themselves, get to decide when they arrive for work and when they leave; how much overtime they get paid; certify their own expenses; and authorise their own holidays. It's the way the entire firm operates.

Founded in 2004, Cougar writes bespoke control system software for a variety of industries, from airlines to water purification. With certification from Microsoft, Siemens, Mitsubishi, and half a dozen other global brands, it is clear that they are technically capable. Hutchinson says: "Over the years we have learned that the way to deliver great service is to be clear about what we are trying to achieve. We match people to work that they really love, and then set them free.

"We help our people to play to their strengths so they can do the things that they really love to do - the things that completely absorb them and come naturally to them. This is in stark contrast to the normal corporate approach."

Every six months, "catisfaction" surveys are held. Employees are

COUGAR'S PROFITS ARE UP EIGHTFOLD IN THREE YEARS

asked what they like in their jobs and what they don't like. Hutchinson explains: "We ask Cats to take action to stop the things they don't like and to do more of the things they do like.

Rather than trying to change people to fit their job, we invite people to change their job to fit themselves."

Training is provided to ensure Cats are in control of their careers. Neuro-linguistic programming courses are supplemented with emotional behaviour training. The results are analysed using strengths-based testing.

A flat structure ensures even junior employees have a strong say in the direction of the company. There is a company council, and senior staff work alongside Cats to ensure ongoing dialogue. No locked offices in this firm. All financial results are published openly. Most important, a quarter of profits are shared with Cats.

"We set out to change the company to deliver great service," says Hutchinson. "Not just the best service in our industry, but a level of service that was thought impossible in the world of engineering projects."

Feedback confirms Cougar achieves this: customers rating Cougar's service at at least seven out of ten has risen from nearly 40 per cent six years ago to almost 90 per cent. Profits are up eightfold in three years. Giving employees freedom really does pay.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

STAR

If you don't know what your customers think of you, it is hard to improve. Which is why Gloucester-based internet service provider Star Technology Services is feedback-obsessed. In the pursuit of "Star-is-faction" (don't groan), the firm provides a masterclass in how to gather accurate and timely data from clients.

Founder Jos White explains: "To gauge how customers rate our service delivery, we have devised a simple, quick and effective 'one-click feedback' mechanism, which enables customers to provide instant feedback on how well we are meeting their expectations.

This one-click banner is incorporated on targeted communications issued to customers. They are asked to rate service by clicking on the score most relevant from one - very poor - to ten, which is fantastic.

"Customers that have experienced an issue with customer service are contacted within 24 hours and we seek to resolve these within 48 hours."

A £3m Oracle CRM system helps Star keep a single view of each customer, despite providing over 70 products and services to half a million business users. The use of feedback, together with CRM and ongoing staff training, has helped Star achieve client churn rate of seven per cent - less than one third of the industry average.



Keep your customer king, reap the rewards

When we first started thinking about Customer Kings, we knew we wanted to celebrate those businesses that were giving their all to building better customer relationships. During a downturn, it tends to be those businesses that focus on the things they can control absolutely that prosper. Customer focus is one of those absolutes.

Needless to say, we were thrilled by the standard of entries. Each of our winners has shown innovation, creativity and dedication to providing outstanding customer service for their patrons, placing their customer's needs right at the heart of their business models.

Research carried out to complement our Customer Kings campaign shows that, in the last 12 months alone, almost 60 per cent of SMEs in the UK have introduced new measures to help build and retain customer relationships. When all eyes appear to be turning towards cost cutting rather than quality of customer service, it is hugely encouraging to see that customer engagement remains so high on the list for so many small businesses.

It's also wonderful to see how these businesses are embracing technology to enhance their service; not simply as an afterthought, or a nice-to-have but as a fundamental part of how they work with their customers. While the IT maze can sometimes be confusing for small businesses, some of the Customer Kings demonstrate perfectly how even the simplest technology can lead to genuine innovation.

Thank you to everyone who entered our search for the UK's best customer-focused firms, and congratulations once again to all of our winners. At Cisco, we always try to ensure that our customer is king; it's highly encouraging to see that this sentiment is alive in the small business community.

Bernadette Wightman

Head of Small Medium Enterprise, Cisco UK and Ireland