Bill's Building Blocks

Did You Miss Your Station?

This semester of teaching at NYU in Brooklyn has started up again. I ride NJ Transit, then the MTA subway to get to campus. The first few cars of the A-Train are often packed between 34th Street/Penn Station and Jay Street/Metro Park. There are so many people that you can't see out the windows. Nine out of ten riders have their faces buried in their cell phones watching movies, playing games, or looking at photos. On the occasions when the conductor does not announce the stop, it is easy to lose track of your progress. So you learn to count stops and try to remember if you are on a local or an express subway. Or you can track your location on Google Maps by smart phone.

Customer service has become particularly annoying since the invention of the cell phone. On the one hand your attention is continuously diverted…"I just have to take this call." On the other hand, the diversion is often a text questionnaire asking you to rate your latest customer service experience…"On a scale of one to five, how likely are you to recommend our service to someone else?" In both cases we are not paying attention to the real work of getting the right product to the right place at the right time for the right price with no hassle.

A valuable mind game to play is to ask the question, "Forget customer service. If this were my only customer order, how can I execute it perfectly and profitably?" Has the order been confirmed with the customer? Does the upstream supply base have the correct material specification revision, source of materials, and capacity to fulfill the factory? Does the factory have the correct assembly documentation revision, skilled labor, and machine capacity to build the product? How is the product delivered to the end customer, through distribution or factory direct? Does the distribution channel have the correct customer deliver-to address and delivery capacity? Are there any known risk issues, perhaps weather or an impending strike, with inbound, midbound, or outbound logistics? How is the customer paying for the product, and can the cash-to-cash cycle be accelerated for all trading partners? How will you track delivery progress from ordering raw material inventory through last-mile delivery? How much margin does each trading partner have for a profitable sale? How much inventory is left over?

You say, "But, this is really basic. Everyone knows all this." I say, "Yes, executing basic blocking and tackling wins the day. And no, apparently everyone does not know that you cannot allow yourself to become so distracted, that you forget the objective."

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