



After-sales, Afterthought?

Why the most overlooked part of the customer journey quietly determines long-term growth

By Nigel Woodall

Companies can invest heavily crafting the perfect first impression. Polished marketing, persuasive sales and onboarding plans that look reassuring. But once the deal is done, attention shifts forward, not back. The energy dissipates and responsibility fragments. What happens after the first sale becomes background noise - something to be managed, not led. And this isn't limited to capital-intensive industries. Whether you sell software, services, equipment, or expertise, every organisation has an after-sales moment - the point at which the promises made become the experience delivered.

Customers feel that shift immediately.

After-sales isn't "after service". It includes every commercial interaction that follows the initial purchase - renewals, replacements, upgrades, consumables, lifecycle decisions, and the ongoing choices that determine lifetime value.

The Blind Spot That Rarely Shows Up On Dashboards

After-sales is often framed as an operational necessity rather than a commercial capability. It sits below the line of strategic attention - treated as a support activity rather than a core business asset.

That framing isn't neutral. It shapes behaviour.

Investment, leadership attention, and talent decisions tend to cluster around the initial point of sale, and not what follows. Everything thereafter is expected to be efficient, contained, and invisible.

Yet post-sale interactions are where loyalty is reinforced or eroded. They are where reputations harden. They are where customers decide whether a supplier is dependable or merely convenient.

This is true whether you sell software, services, equipment, or expertise. Every organisation has an after-sales moment - the point where the promise made becomes the experience delivered. And it applies just as much in FMCG, retail, and consumer brands, where repeat purchase behaviour is shaped entirely by what happens after the product is in the customer's hands.

Most acknowledge this in principle. Far fewer behave as if it's true.

When After-sales Becomes a Logistics Problem

In many businesses, after-sales is managed as a flow issue: tickets, parts, lead times, costs. Performance is measured in containment rather than consequence.

This creates a subtle but damaging shift. Service becomes something to optimise, not something to design. Ownership blurs and accountability becomes procedural instead of commercial.

The result is rarely failure, it's performance that's adequate and therefore easier to ignore.

Adequate service rarely triggers escalation. It also rarely creates advantage.

Leadership Distance and the Comfort of Predictability

A significant proportion of senior executives come from finance-led backgrounds. That brings rigour, discipline, and control - all of which matter.

Forecasts, order books, capex cycles, and margin reports are predictable. After-sales is not. It operates at the point of use, not the point of plan. It's shaped by breakdowns, urgency, human behaviour, and expectation.

For leaders conditioned to manage what can be forecast, after-sales can feel decidedly messy. The rhythm of after-sales is reactive, not predictive - and what I call the '*soft and fluffy*' elements can feel alien to leaders steeped in financial orthodoxy. As a result, after-sales often sits further from the executive agenda than leaders would publicly admit.

Where the Margin Really Lives

In many capital-intensive industries, the commercial logic is already clear, even if behaviour has not caught up.

Aircraft engines, heavy machinery, industrial systems - these products are frequently sold at thin margins. Sometimes at a loss. The profit sits in what follows: service contracts, parts, upgrades, uptime guarantees.

This is not peripheral activity. It **is** the business model. The same pattern appears in less obvious places.

The shift from product sales to monetised availability and performance changes what matters operationally. Pricing sophistication, customer usage insight, responsiveness, and trust become central. Yet many organisations still manage after-sales with the same mindset they apply to internal cost centres.

While this contradiction is rarely acknowledged, customers experience it anyway.

Inventory as a Truth Test

Nowhere does this disconnect surface more clearly than in inventory decisions.

Just-in-time thinking optimises cash. It also assumes predictability, but after-sales rarely offers that luxury.

Failures do not follow schedules and operating conditions can vary widely. Human behaviour introduces further complexity to the equation. Consequently, service organisations must plan not just for what's likely, but for what's consequential.

Holding critical parts can look inefficient on a balance sheet. Being without them at the wrong moment is commercially decisive.

Some organisations recognise this implicitly. Others only discover it when a customer cannot afford the delay.

Availability is not overhead. It is intent made visible.

Two Views of Service, Two Outcomes

Independent service providers tend to treat after-sales as a revenue generator. OEMs often treat it as a cost exposure. The distinction is subtle in language and stark in results.

One builds systems, incentives, and inventory around responsiveness. The other optimises for containment and hopes customers accept the trade-off.

Customer trust forms accordingly.

The Uncomfortable Gap

Most leaders would say after-sales matters, but their organisations often tell a different story.

Look at where leadership time is spent. Look at what's measured, reviewed, and rewarded.

Look at which roles are treated as valued proving grounds - and which are not.

Customers do not experience intent. They experience outcomes.

Every organisation creates those outcomes, whether deliberately or by default. And once they're created, they're remarkably hard to undo. Lost trust doesn't come with a fanfare, it simply shows up later, as hesitation, and quiet attrition.

After-sales sits exactly where strategy collides with reality. How it's treated exposes what a business truly values. Not what it claims to value, but what it's willing to protect, prioritise, and tolerate.

The question is no longer whether after-sales is important.

It's whether your organisation behaves as if it is - and how confident you are in the answer.



These perspectives draw on work across multiple sectors and themes developed over time, including those set out in *After-sales Excellence: Driving Improvement, Customer Satisfaction, and Growth* - by Nigel Woodall.

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