



After-sales, Afterthought?

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

By Nigel Woodall

Companies invest heavily crafting the perfect first impression using polished marketing, persuasive sales skills and fabulous onboarding plans. But once the deal is done, attention shifts forward to the next new target, and the expected follow-through gets forgotten. The energy dissipates and responsibility for delivery fragments. What happens after the first sale becomes organisational background noise - something to be managed, not driven for performance.

My experience has shown that 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.

However, that framing isn't neutral as it shapes behaviour.

Investment, leadership attention, and talent decisions tend to cluster around the initial point of sale, and not what follows. It's taken for granted that everything thereafter will be managed efficiently.

Yet post-sale interactions are where customer loyalty is reinforced or eroded. They are where customers decide whether a supplier is dependable, merely convenient, or to be avoided.

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, but unfortunately, 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: P.Os, tickets, parts, lead times, costs. Where performance is even measured, it's commonly based on averages,

with no focus on the individual failures that shape customer experience.

This changes organisational behaviour, as the average becomes the benchmark. Outliers are tolerated, creating a subtle but damaging shift.

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

Adequate service rarely triggers escalation, but conversely it also rarely creates advantage.

Leadership Distance and the Comfort of Predictability

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

However, where forecasts, order books, capex cycles, and margin reports are predictable, after-sales isn't. It operates at the point of use, not the point of plan, and is 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 OEM and/or 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 hasn't caught up.

Heavy machinery, aircraft engines, industrial systems - these products are frequently sold at thin margins, and sometimes at a loss. The profit sits in what follows: service contracts, parts, upgrades, uptime guarantees, etc.

But, this isn't 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 I see many organisations still managing after-sales with an OEM mindset and the same one they apply to internal cost centres.

While this obvious contradiction is rarely acknowledged, the customers experience its output 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 don't follow schedules, and operating conditions can vary widely. Human behaviour introduces further complexity to the equation, and so 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, but being without them at the wrong moment is commercially decisive.

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

Availability isn't overhead, it's commitment made visible.

Two Views of Service, Two Outcomes

Independent service providers treat after-sales as a revenue generator. OEMs often treat it as a cost exposure. This distinction may be subtle in language, but it's stark in the results.

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

But customers don't judge the intent of a business. They judge the moment they needed a critical part - and it wasn't there.

The Uncomfortable Gap

Most leaders would say after-sales matters, but I see too many where their organisations 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 aren't.

Customers don't feel your plans. They feel your performance, and that's a direct product of how your organisation behaves.

Once trust is damaged, it's hard to win back. When customers lose confidence, they don't announce it. But you will certainly see it later in the missed renewals and silent drop-offs.

After-sales sits exactly where 'orthodox' business strategy collides with reality. How it's treated exposes what's truly valued - not what it claims to value, but what it's willing to protect, prioritise, and accept.

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 that 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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