

Customer Satisfaction: Are You Treating the Symptoms or the Malady?

Corporations everywhere are spending more than ever before trying to improve their customer service. Yet, the level of customer satisfaction across nearly all industries is falling. What's wrong? A BusinessWeek Magazine article cover screamed "WHY SERVICE STINKS". Where is the fast in the fast food industry where drive-up or walk-in service can take ten, fifteen, twenty minutes or more? What about telephone response cues that offer callers recorded messages warning that, "Due to unusually high call volume, wait times may be many minutes long?" Or how about local small businesses such as dry cleaners and specialty stores whose staff do not care enough to even remember frequent patrons names? Today customer service and satisfaction are more often than not abysmal.

All this despite the hundreds of millions of dollars annually that corporations are pouring into new systems and training, with the sole intention of winning customer loyalty. Why aren't these massive efforts paying huge dividends? One would think that by now the organizations that have committed these vast resources would have a large cadre of satisfied, loyal customers, but in most cases just the opposite is true.

The problem is that the majority of the money is being spent treating the sneeze and not the cold. As we have all experienced when sick, no matter how much medication we consume, we will still feel miserable, because it can only mask the illness by minimizing the symptoms. Despite our attempts at remedies, our customers remain disappointed by poor service. If we are to ever overcome this problem, we must get to the source of the illness and treat its cause, rather than merely the symptoms.

What then is the source? It stems from an unwillingness at the highest levels of our organizations' Leadership, to see, identify with and resolve the true concerns of our customers. Thus, all of the training and indoctrination of our front line people is little more than window dressing, albeit very expensive window dressing. Our people are not first educated to empathize with the "why" that drives our customers' desires and second, they are not empowered to instantly take the necessary action to effect the circumstances to not only meet, but exceed our customers' expectations.

Let me illustrate with an example. I recently received an emergency call from a client to attend a hastily called meeting in Huntsville, AL the next morning. To do so, I flew Delta Airlines via a hub city. Because of the last minute nature of the trip, I could not obtain a first class seat on either the outbound or return, as both were sold out. On my return, the flight out of Huntsville left late and was further delayed landing in Atlanta and I therefore missed my connecting flight. After warming an airport chair for an extra couple of hours, the next flight out was also delayed. By now, due to Delta, I had lost a considerable part of my day. When I looked around the boarding area, it was clear that there were very few passengers for this evening flight. Before boarding began, I went up to the gate agent and explained "nicely" that due to Delta's flight delays I had missed one connecting flight and would now be delayed once again. Given these

circumstances, even though my ticket was coach, as that is all that had been available when I booked, I asked to be upgraded, especially since the plane would be 90% empty. The agent was very sympathetic and asked how I wanted to "handle" the upgrade. I explained that under the circumstances I was requesting a courtesy upgrade. Her answer was that "she was not authorized to do so" without either payment or redemption of miles. Further displeased, I headed for the "Customer Service Center," where I was greeted with a long waiting line of weary travelers. With my flight now boarding, I turned back to the gate. Once onboard, I counted six first class passengers out of fourteen seats. The rest of the plane was virtually empty.

Now I could have become angry back at the gate, made a scene, demanded to see a supervisor and received a courtesy upgrade. However, this was not what I desired. All I had wanted was to be treated as a valued, business customer who in this case, as always, pays full published fare for every ticket due to the nature of my travel schedule. I typify the business traveler goldmine that keeps the airlines in the green. I am certain that this particular gate agent would have honored my request, had Delta's rules permitted her to make on the spot judgment calls of this nature. It would have cost Delta NOTHING! The plane was virtually empty, first class was more than half empty. The multiple delay problems had been Delta's, not mine. Instead, my polite request was denied. Now, how do you think this customer feels about Delta? More importantly, how likely will I be to book Delta in the future. I do not get mad easily, but I do have a long memory of poor Customer Service!

The Customer Service solution is simple. Educate your people as to how the customer feels when things go wrong. Teach them to empathize, as this gate agent did. But then empower them to make a real difference in creating opportunities to build customer loyalty. The cost to the company of doing so is typically small to insignificant. The payoff is GIGANTIC!

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