

## **Treating the Customer Dissatisfaction Epidemic: How to Go Beyond Simply Masking the Symptoms**

Corporations in every sector are spending more than ever before in an attempt to improve their customer service levels. Every year they pour hundreds of millions of dollars into new systems and training programs that promise them the ability to win customer loyalty. Despite their efforts, however, customer satisfaction results continue to fall. 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.

Think about the scenarios that play out every day. Where is the "fast" in the fast food industry, when drive-up or walk-in service can now take ten, fifteen, even twenty minutes or more? Why are there so many 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 remember the names of frequent patrons? Today, customer service and satisfaction are more often than not abysmal.

The main problem is that the majority of the money being spent is simply masking the symptoms of the epidemic. As most people have experienced when sick, no matter how much cold medication you consume, you will still feel miserable because it can only mask the illness by minimizing the symptoms. The same holds true in business. Despite the corporate world's attempts at eliminating customer dissatisfaction, poor service continues to sicken the majority of consumers. If companies are to ever overcome this problem, they must get to the source of the epidemic and treat its cause rather than merely mask the symptoms.

## Treating the Disease Within

The source of customer dissatisfaction stems from an organization's leader's unwillingness to see, identify with, and resolve the customer's true concerns. Therefore, all the training and indoctrination they can give their front line people is little more than window dressing. If employees are not first educated to empathize with the "why" that drives their customers' desires, and second, if they are not empowered to instantly take the necessary action to effect the circumstances to exceed their customers' expectations, then there's little hope for improved service. Here's an example of the disease at work: A business owner recently received an emergency call from a client to attend a hastily called meeting in Huntsville, Alabama the next morning. In order to attend, he booked a flight that had a layover in a major city. Because of the last minute nature of the trip, he could not obtain a first class seat on either the outbound or return, as both were sold out.

On his return, the flight out of Huntsville left late, causing him to miss his connector flight in Atlanta. After warming an airport chair for an extra couple of hours, he discovered that the next flight out was delayed as well. By now, due to the airline, he had lost a considerable part of his day. When he looked around the boarding area, it was clear that there were very few passengers for the evening flight. Before boarding began, he went up to the gate agent and explained politely that due to the airline's flight delays he had missed one connecting flight and would now be delayed once again. Given these circumstances, even though his ticket was coach, as that is all that had been available when he booked, he asked to be upgraded, especially since the plane would be 90% empty. The agent was very sympathetic and asked how he wanted to "handle" the upgrade. He explained that under the circumstances he 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, the business traveler headed for the Customer Service Center, where he encountered a long line of weary travelers. With his flight now boarding, he abandoned his mission and returned to the gate. Once onboard, he counted six first class passengers out of fourteen seats. The rest of the plane was virtually empty.

The airline patron 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 he desired. All he had wanted was to be treated as a valued business customer.

There's little doubt that the gate agent would have honored his request had the airline's rules permitted her to make on the spot judgment calls of this nature. Even more disturbing is that since first class was virtually empty, it would have cost the airline nothing to gain this traveler's respect and loyalty. The multiple delay problems had been the airline's, not the traveler's, yet they denied his polite request.

Given this information, how do you think this customer feels about that airline? More important, how likely is he to book a flight with that airline in the future? Most customers don't get irate easily, but they do have a long memory of poor customer service.

### The Remedy is Within Reach

The customer service solution is simple. Educate your people as to how the customer feels when things go wrong. Teach them to empathize, as the gate agent did. And then take your training an important step further: Empower your people to make a real difference in creating opportunities to build customer loyalty. The cost to the company for doing so is typically small to insignificant, yet the payoff is often gigantic.



John Di Frances is an internationally recognized expert on Strategic Business Issues. His professional career spans thirty years of global corporate, nonprofit, academic and government agency experience in senior executive and industry leadership positions. John advises senior executives globally and is a prominent professional speaker. Since 1983 he has served as the Managing Partner of DI FRANCES & ASSOCIATES, LLC.