

Service with a Smile?

Whether in a restaurant, auto service center or with growing regularity, in business to business dealings, the level of customer service received today is on a downhill slide. Too often, the customer is simply acknowledged rather than greeted with a warm and friendly smile. We find ourselves straining to interpret the muttered responses to our inquiries.

It is a sad state of affairs when the customer feels neither welcome nor appreciated. Why is it so difficult to show simple, common courtesy? Doubtless, it is an indication of a major cultural shift. However, as a vendor it definitely becomes a problem when employees are so short-sighted as not to understand the basic principles of cause and effect. The fact is that their livelihood and yours depends on the customer who walks through the door of your place of business.

Organizations throughout United States and Canada spend millions of dollars each year on customer service training programs. Certainly, the problem is not unique to North America. Across the industrialized world, the malady is pandemic and this explains the substantial resources poured into customer service development programs.

Why then are we not seeing significant results? The purchase of virtually all goods and services involves a process whereby the customer moves from interest, to inclination, to desire, and ultimately, to a purchase decision. During that process, whether or not the customer completes the purchase is largely determined by the attitude of the person on the selling side of the transaction. More often than not, the buyer's attitude reflects that of their salesperson. Thus, the employee attempting to close a sale will find it much easier to do so, if the customer is reciprocating the positive attitude, courtesy and friendliness they have been shown.

In many industries, the post-sale service experience is equally important, especially in an environment rife with technically complex products and services. This trend will persist as technological complexity increases exponentially and our population continues to age. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of the year 2005 there are 85 million Americans over the age of 50, who will have cumulative purchasing power of \$900 billion annually. The combination of increasing technical complexity and an aging population will result in a greater proportion of sales transactions requiring post-sale customer service on a periodic or continuing basis.

Given the customer service problems we currently face coupled with the growing demand for increased levels of pre- and post-sale customer service, organizations need to begin thinking much more seriously about how they will rise to meet these growing market demands. Another factor to consider will be the demographic reality of the shrinking pool of younger workers available to fill the growing requirements for one-on-one customer service, frequently an entry level job.

There are several practical steps that we can take to begin improving our customer service. These include:

1. Hire selectively. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Conduct discerning, well prepared interviews involving others in the process. Group interviews are especially effective and are becoming standard practice for a growing number of organizations. In this manner, you will be more likely to detect social issues which would affect performance. If it's a people job, it's critical that you hire people who like people. Frequently in our haste to fill a vacant entry level position, we can miss the most obvious indicators of potential success or failure. People who are open, approachable and generally pleasant are far more likely to respond in a positive manner to the customer's needs. Prospective employees who are guarded, expressionless, excessively shy or evidence a "a cold fish" personality during the interview process are not the best choice.

2. Train your people thoroughly. An employee who thoroughly understands the organization they represent, as well as its policies, products and services, will be far more likely to interact successfully with your customers. Remember also that sales training is never a one-time event applicable only for new employees. Today more than ever, executives recognize the need for periodic refresher courses due to rapid and dynamic change in markets, product and service innovations and business methods.

3. Become the example. Actions speak louder than words. I am often perplexed by organizations who reach for high standards of excellence in customer service, while failing to treat their personnel with similar courtesy. Third-rate employee policies do not inspire first-class performance. Unfortunately, they lead to high turnover rates and, as a result, increased training expenditures. Disgruntled employees are less likely to project the positive, helpful attitudes and actions that come naturally with happy, satisfied employees. Management must take appropriate action to ensure employees are treated as well as we would have them treat our customers.

4. Solicit customer feedback and act promptly upon it. If our only scorecard is how well we think our customers are being treated or alternately, those instances when a customer takes the time and effort to ensure their complaint reaches management, then we have no clear understanding of how our customers are truly being served. It is imperative to continually solicit customer feedback across a broad range of encounters.

We also need to obtain this information in ways that ensure we receive more than superficial comments. There is an old rule that applies to any kind of feedback, whether it be from customers, employees or even family members. How sincerely we want to know their feelings and impressions is evidenced by the type of questions we ask. Superficial questions elicit superficial responses. Thoughtful questions generate constructive answers.

5. Make sure your senior leadership has access to unfiltered feedback from your operating personnel and first line managers. In almost every organization, the people on the front lines fully understand the level of customer satisfaction being provided. The difficulty often lies in the transferral of this information up the organizational hierarchy and to the leadership. The greatest dilemma any military general in the field faces is in obtaining the unvarnished truth on what is really taking place at the battlefield. Similarly, many senior executives are in the dark as to the caliber of responsiveness and customer satisfaction occurring at the front lines of their organization.

If we want our customers to regularly experience a heartfelt smile, willing attitude and exceptional service, we as leaders must set the example by creating a positive work environment where these values are considered to be vitally important. We must then equip and empower sales personnel through rigorous training initiatives.

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