

## Service with a Scowl

We have all experienced it far too frequently, whether in a restaurant, automobile service center, local post office or, with growing regularity, even at the business to business level. The person we are dealing with in these face-to-face relationships does not even attempt to feign a smile, but rather greets us with a scowl or avoids eye contact with us altogether and grudgingly mutters responses to our requests and questions.

What's wrong here? Is it really so difficult to show common courtesy along with a little friendliness to the customer? Have we ventured so far from the civility of earlier days and become so short sighted as to our dependence upon customers for our own livelihood, that we refuse to treat others as we would want to be treated?

Today organizations in the United States and Canada spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually training their employees in providing Customer Service, and the problem is not unique to North America. Across the industrialized world, the issue is the same and so is the extent to which resources are being poured into training in an attempt to counter the negative effects. If such vast resources are continuously being spent on such a simple and obvious problem, why are we not seeing outstanding results?

Purchasing virtually any goods or services is a process whereby the customer moves from interest, to desire, to decision. During that process one of the primary determinants of whether the customer completes the purchase, as well as their level of satisfaction in the sales process, is the attitude of the person on the selling side of the transaction. Moreover, the buyer's attitude frequently reflects that of their salesperson. Thus, an employee attempting to close the sale will generally find it much easier to do so if the customer is responding to the positive attitude, courtesy and friendliness they have been displaying.

Today in many industries, the post-sale service experience is equally as important, especially in an environment that is rife with increasingly technically complex products and services. This trend will continue, as technological complexity increases at a faster rate and as our population continues to age. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2005 there will be 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 the aging population will result in an increased proportion of sales transactions requiring post-sale customer service on a periodic or continuing basis.

Given the customer service problems we face today, coupled with the growing demand for increased levels of pre- and post-sale customer service, we need to begin thinking much more seriously about how our organizations will rise to meet these growing market demands. Adding to this problem will be the demographic reality of a shrinking pool of available younger workers, who will be available to fill the growing requirements for one-on-one customer service, which is frequently an entry level job.

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

- 1. Hire happy people.** Frequently in our hiring process, especially for that of entry level employees, we miss some of the most obvious indicators of likely success or failure, in our haste to find a "warm body" to fill vacant positions. People who are open, approachable and generally happy are far more likely to respond in a positive manner to our customers' needs. Prospective employees who are guarded, excessively shy or evidence the personality of "a cold fish" during the interview process, probably are not good hires at the outset.
- 2. Train your people thoroughly.** An employee who thoroughly understands the organization they represent, as well as its policies, products and services, is far more likely to interface positively with your customers. Remember also, that training of this sort is not a one-time-for-life event, applicable only to new employees. Today more than ever, organizations, their markets, product and service offerings and business methods are all dynamically and rapidly changing.

**3. Treat your people exceedingly well.** I am frequently amazed at how many organizations expect their personnel to excel in the area of customer service, while at the same time their own treatment of personnel leaves much to be desired. Employees, who are unhappy on the job, are not likely to evidence the positive, helpful attitudes and actions that happy, satisfied employees will. Here again, we need to ensure that we treat our employees, as we would have them treat our customers and ourselves.

**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 cases where a customer takes the time and effort to insure that their complaint has been heard by the management, then we really have no understanding of how well our customers are truly being served. We need to be actively and continuously soliciting our customers' feedback and we need to be doing it in ways that insure we will 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 our family members. How truly we really want to know their feelings and impressions is clearly evidenced by the types of questions we ask. Superficial questions return superficial responses. Thoughtful, insightful questions result in honest, valuable answers.

**5. Insure that your senior leadership is hearing unfiltered feedback from both your operating personnel and your first line managers.** In almost every organization, the people on the front lines have a clear understanding of the level of customer satisfaction being provided. The problem lies in the movement of this information up the organizational hierarchy to the leadership. The greatest dilemma that any military general in the field continuously faces is obtaining the unvarnished truth concerning what is occurring on the battlefield. Similarly, many senior executives have little concept of the responsiveness and customer satisfaction occurring at the front lines of their organization.

If we want our customers to regularly experience service with a warm, heartfelt smile, rather than a scowl, we as leaders must set the example as well as the vision!



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