

RESEARCH ● *Not one for all*

Add service element back in to get satisfaction

By TODD POLIFKA

We live in a customer-focused society. That is, as business owners and managers we focus all of our attention on customers. For several hours a day, corporate energy is focused on how to find new customers, repeat customers, loyal customers and more customers than our competition. Once acquired, customers are then segmented, upsold and processed. In the rush to be focused on all aspects of the customer, it appears that many companies seem to have forgotten about the two most important—customer satisfaction and customer service.

Many companies talk about customer service, but sadly for most it has become just that—talk. While companies are busy knocking down the barriers for customers to buy from us, they are putting up more barriers than ever for maintaining that relationship with the customer, especially if something goes wrong.

Business executives apply a great deal of energy and effort to the immediate sale, but we are in danger of missing the forest for the trees. Rather than try to build a relationship that translates into not only a sale today but future sales and relationships and incremental sales due to referrals, companies are stuck in a mode where they are focusing only on

getting that immediate sale.

How about your business? Is everyone at your company on the same page regarding customer service? Do you think it's possible? The Walt Disney Co.'s 50,000-plus employees consistently deliver legendary customer service, which has kept them ranked as an elite customer service company for well over a decade. There are several other companies doing this as well, such as Nordstrom, Southwest Airlines, Build-A-Bear Workshop Inc. and Marriot International Inc. to name a few. How do they do it?

The answer is actually very simple. They have made customer service part of their everyday business activity, or what is more commonly being referred to as their customer culture. Customer service has become infused throughout everything they do, from answering the phones, to solving problems, to ensuring that the customer is completely satisfied. It will require companies to assess every aspect of their operations, but the reward of life-long customers who become advocates for your brand and refer you to others is worth it.

Here are six areas to begin focusing on that in the long run will help you change your company's culture to one of customer service and customer satisfaction:

Accessibility—remove barriers to customer lines of communica-

tion

The No. 1 complaint of customers, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce's Office of Consumer Affairs, is that they are not able to speak to someone about their issue. If they are able to get a hold of a live person, their second biggest complaint is that it is not someone with the authority to solve their issues. In a customer service culture, it is not only important to have someone answering phones and e-mails in a timely manner, it is important that every employee, from the president on down, is empowered to solve the customers' problems, or to immediately involve someone who can.

Transparent pricing—no hidden costs or secondary costs

Customers feel immediately cheated when they have to pay more than the agreed upon price. No matter how legitimate the reason, it is the perception of customers who have to pay an amount different than the agreed upon price that they have become a victim of fraud.

In a customer service culture, upfront and transparent pricing has to happen; if there are any further charges that may be applicable, such as service contracts or warranties, present those options and prices to the customer before closing the sale.

What you see is what you get—

avoid the feeling of bait-and-switch

With the increasing amount of Internet purchases, customers are no longer so concerned about being able to stop by the showroom and “kick a few tires.” They are, however, more and more concerned about receiving the goods they have seen represented. In your advertising, photos and descriptions that provide visual demonstration of services, you must be exacting in how truly you represent your offerings.

Constant communications— quick response

The communication can be live or virtual, but it has to happen freely and timely. We are increasingly becoming a society that expects instant gratification. With technology today, there is no reason that your people do not have access to communications, whether it is via phone or Internet. Quick and frequent communication goes a long way toward giving the percep-

tion that you are taking action on their problem, and attempting to resolve it.

Quality products, services and craftsmanship

It would seem that quality on all levels should be an obvious part of any company’s way of doing business, but if it really is in place, it means that there are fewer opportunities for a customer to have an issue with the goods or services they are purchasing. The longer a product lasts, the longer a customer is satisfied.

Unmatched passion for the customer

As a company you probably got into a business because you had a passion for the product or services you were selling. You should have that same level of passion for the people who buy those products or services. And if you want them to be satisfied and to keep purchasing from you, you need to be more passionate

about the customers than your competition. This is extremely important in a crowded industry where your product may be rather similar to those of a competitor.

Putting the service back into customer service may take a commitment from you and your team and will require that a lot of time and effort be invested in your customer service and care, but the dividends are well worth it. Your company can join the select group of those companies that walk the talk and don’t just pay lip service to customer service and actually achieve customer satisfaction.

Now, how may I help you? ■

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