

Customer Service – A Fading Memory?

Virtually every business and their employees know the importance of delivering great customer service. So, why is it so difficult to get good service from companies today? I think there are several reasons:

- People are overworked. Shareholders of most organizations demand a higher return on their investment each year. This leads to cutbacks which creates a heavier workload for the remaining employees.
- Entry level employees are not properly taught how to deal with customers. My daughter worked for several retailers and she seldom received any formal training on dealing with customers.
- We forget the importance of delivering great service. In today's fast-paced society many people think that customer service is something of the past. Yet, consumers are hungry for great service and many of them will pay extra for it.
- It is someone else's problem. Because of cutbacks and reductions in head count, many people think customer service is somebody else's responsibility. But the reality is that service is everyone's duty. Service is important for both internal and external customers.
- We think it is the customer's fault. When I was a frequent flyer I called to arrange for an upgrade on a flight. When I arrived at the airport, the agent could not find any record of it and "suggested" that I had not actually made the call.
- Systems and processes make it difficult to resolve the situation. Computers are great – most of the time. Unfortunately, in some situations, computers restrict an employee's ability to resolve a customer's concern.
- Company policies. This is pretty straightforward but it is one of most critical reasons customer service is so poor. Policies are put into place to protect the company. The larger the company, the more policies are evident. And for good reason. However, these policies often restrict employees from making good business decisions.

Some sales people and business owners seem to think that pleasing customers is an impossible task. Case in point: A good friend of mine recently moved and when the owner of the moving company dropped by to pick up his payment he asked for feedback. My friend gave his honest opinion and not all of it was positive. The owner of the moving company began to immediately justify the behavior of his personnel even though my friend had a legitimate concern.

This caused me to reflect on similar situations I have encountered over the years. As I thought about it, I realized that most of the complaints I voiced to a company were a direct result of the way I had been treated by an individual in the organization. This made me think of an article I once read that stated that 68% of customers stop doing business with a particular company due to the attitude of an employee and/or manager.

Great customer service is not something that happens naturally within in a business. It has to be developed and nurtured. It must be integrated into the business philosophy. For example, one of my policies is to respond to all voice mail and e-mail messages

within twenty-four hours. It may be minor but I've learned that people expect a quick response to their question or concern.

How can you ensure your customers receive great service all the time? I'm not sure there is one answer. I do, however, have a few suggestions:

1. Create policies that put the customer first instead of the business. Make it easy to do business with you. Trust them. Will you get taken advantage of? Occasionally. But the majority of people are honest which means you should run your business on the majority, rather than the minority.
2. Lead by example. Don't be like the owner of the moving company my friend used. Treat your customers with respect. Keep your ego in check. Give people the benefit of the doubt.
3. Recognize that every complaint is an opportunity to improve your business. Keep your ego in check and seek ways to resolve the issue instead of defending the mistake
4. Train your staff. If you don't know what good customer service is, ask your current customers. They will tell you. Then teach your team the basics. If necessary, hire a professional to help you. The investment usually outweighs the cost.
5. Finally, treat your employees with respect and allow them to make decisions. The more difficult you make it for your team to deliver great service, the less likely they will.

Customer service is not something you do; it is the way you view and operate your business on a daily basis.

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