

Customer Service Improvement Programs – The Not-So-Obvious Obvious Need

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An organization's ability to satisfy customers' needs determines, to a large degree, how well it will be able to compete with similar businesses offering similar products. Typically, the better a company is at thrilling customers, the more money and growth it generates.

There are, of course, many facets to customer service satisfaction. Some of the more important aspects revolve around the manner in which customers are treated during in-person visits, on the telephone, in letter and electronic communications.

The importance of excellent customer service is obvious, isn't it? Business professionals instinctively recognize the connection between quality customer service and profit. Ask anyone and they will tell you that satisfying the customer is a top priority in their business. Yes, the need is obvious.

There is a significant disconnect, however, between need and action to fulfill the need in most organizations. If the need for excellent customer service is so obvious why are meaningful customer service training, customer service assessment and customer service improvement programs such low priorities in so many organizations?

If you sample the actual quality and "feel" of customer service provided by most businesses, you will find that the real commitment to it is of the "pie crust" variety – easily made and more easily broken. Few businesses have identified customer service standards, and fewer yet measure, survey or perform objective customer service assessments. Effective customer service training is almost oxymoronic.

Plaques, banners, invoices, on-hold messages and other customer communications often contain the words "we are committed to delivering

outstanding customer service.” The problem is that the reality often directly contradicts the marketing hype. As a nation, we have become accustomed to being ignored in stores, not being able to locate help when we need it, waiting in line or on the phone for long periods of time, being treated rudely or dismissively by service providers, getting incorrect information, being transferred multiple times to get an issue resolved, not getting what we want, when we want it, etc. When someone at a quick food restaurant actually says either please or thank you, looks up at us while taking or delivering an order, or appears to be even slightly interested in us as people, we are thrilled. Luckily for most businesses, the average American sets the customer service bar pretty low.

The fact that many organizations really don’t “get it” about customer service should bring a smile of anticipation and a quickening of heartbeat to those who do and those who are about to really commit to thrill their customers. Average service blends into the fabric of day-to-day life. I don’t remember ever hearing anyone saying, “Hey, you should go to _____, their service is average.”

Above average sticks out, excellent is always noticed. Many people have never shopped at Nordstrom because they are geographically or economically unable to do so but everyone knows that the shopping experience there is something to be prized. Visitors to communities lucky enough to have a Nordstrom store often make it a destination of choice just so that they can see what all the talk is about. Many people drive hours just to shop at Nordstrom. Excellent makes people go out of their way to spend money with your organization.

Why Doesn’t Customer Service Get the Respect It Deserves?

There are many reasons that customer service doesn’t really get the priority it deserves today.

The first is that many business managers’ assume that they are doing OK right now. There is a paucity of positive examples from which to assess their overall customer satisfaction standing. Since many managers have really never experienced world class customer service, all they see is average or less, they look at what they deliver with natural, but under informed, pride.

The second reason is that customers don't complain very often. Most of us accept the bad service and move on. Since there are so few complaints, managers assume that their customer service results are good. The lack of customer complaints, however, does not mean that customers are happy – it just means they aren't complaining. The cash register continues to ring until the last sale. Unfortunately, many business professionals don't see the last sale coming.

Another reason for poor customer service awareness is that polite society isn't very polite today. As we audit customer service for our clients, for example, we find that "please", "thank you", "how may I be of assistance" are actually said only a fraction of the times the average manager estimates they are prior to the audit. On average, only two or three in 10 interactions with customers will contain **any** of these or similar expressions.

We also don't know how to appropriately measure customer service. The number of seconds you are on a call, for example, is one of the primary service quality measurements in many call centers. As a result, some telephone representatives immediately disconnect the phone when a new client comes on the line to increase their rating.

Such ill-conceived customer service metrics actually impede the delivery of good service to customers. These measurements are only one-half step better than having no measurements at all – which is the case in the overwhelming majority of organizations.

When otherwise valid measurement could be taken, they are often only done through the internal quality department of an organization. Quality departments frequently become purist, bureaucratic and lose touch with what the customer really wants.

These departments often hurt the spirit of customer service by becoming myopic over the unimportant mass of customer service details and paperwork. They will happily ding a customer service representative for forgetting to check a box on a form rather than concern themselves with the real (as opposed to scripted) quality of questioning, problem solving and courtesy the representative brings to the conversation. To combat this, it is advisable to use "Secret Shopper" organizations that will objectively and realistically measure customer service.

What You Can Do Today to Make it Better

The most important step you can make is to get an objective customer service assessment (some call it customer service audit, "Secret Shopper", customer surveys, etc.). Let someone who doesn't have a vested interest objectively sample your service and provide a written report on how you are doing. While these reports may not always be pleasant, they will provide you both a benchmark against which you can measure future progress and a data that you can use to determine where to start your customer service improvement program. The customer service assessment process typically involves "Secret Shopper", written customer service surveys, customer "exit" interviews, focus groups and a variety of other methods to ensure the reliability of the information they generate.

Vendors abound and prices are often quite reasonable. Look for a vendor who can be objective and will be able to both do the assessment and provide ongoing improvement support, measurement and suggestions.

Once you find out where you are, it is time to develop customer service standards for your business. How, specifically, do you want customers to feel about your organization each time they have an interaction with it? What specific things must be done during each of these interactions to ensure the client actually does come away with these feelings? This step will help you develop and align your management team about the fundamentals of true customer service. Nothing should be taken for granted, no action to minor to consider and list.

Once you've defined customer service standards for each client interaction opportunity, you need to effectively train each and every employee on how to deliver those standards. Customer service often suffers because there is no meaningful customer service training in a business. People are expected to report with most of the "soft skills" necessary for the position. When they don't, we blame them and, even worse, the customer for the shortfall of results.

When customer service training is done, it is often "check the box" activity at best. There is little opportunity to practice the skills taught in a safe environment and fewer measurements of the use of those skills and the development of their ability to use them. Given this approach, businesses find that there are as many approaches to the "people" side of customer

service as there are people – some very, very good and some very, very bad. The cacophony of approaches ensures that the customer, the employees and company leadership are confused.

Good training requires a focus on “this” employee. Training must be focused on the needs of each participant. The methods of doing this are outside the scope of this article but your ability to engage each learner will promote effective knowledge transfer and skill development. In addition to using the basic principles of adult learning, training must not be allowed to stop at the classroom door. Ongoing measurement, practice and reinforcement are keys to true customer service satisfaction. All “quick fix” programs to improve customer service performance are at best the “emperor’s new cloths”. Customer service training takes both time and focused effort. It is, however, more than worth the investment if properly done.

Finally, you should re-audit your customer service processes periodically to see how you’ve progressed and what needs to be done next.

Good customer service will help your business grow, thrill your customers, help employee morale and allow you to take both more pride in your organization and less stress home with you each day. It is obvious that we need to do what isn’t obvious – commit to a truly better service.

* Some organizations operate in monopoly or near monopoly conditions and are effectively isolated from severe disturbance by day-to-day customer service concerns. Even these organizations are impacted longer-term by the progressively more disgruntled population they do not fully satisfy.

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