



Wowing Customers So they Return Time after Time

Customer service is critical to succeed in today's tough market, but sadly it appears to be a dying art. What do our customers expect? Customers expect quality service which meets their needs. Yet, the key to quality customer service is to go beyond what the customer expects. World class customer service is what is needed to win customers' trust and loyalty in a way that will ensure a long-term satisfying relationship. We are all customers and know what we like and do not like. Employees, however, are unaware that they become the organization to the customer. A bad experience with one employee can then be generalized to the entire organization. Have you ever had a terrible experience at a restaurant or hotel chain? Although the bad incident may have only involved one employee, the customer will often say, "Never again!!" Not only will they not utilize your organization again, they usually tell others about their experience. A study about customer satisfaction determined:

- 96% of unhappy customers never complain about rude treatment
- At least 90% who are dissatisfied with service never buy or come back
- Dissatisfied customers tell their story to at least 9 other people
- 13% will tell their story to 20 others

Research Institute of America

How then do we help our employees to understand how imperative world class customer service is for the company's viability? The main reason is the customers, not the business, pays the employees' wages. Without satisfied customers, they will not have a job.

Elements of Quality Service

Quality service begins by knowing your customer and what they expect. Employees must understand the goals of the organization and the nature of what they are to provide to the consumer. The initial interaction whether on the phone, through email or in person is where quality service begins. From the first word, the reputation of your organization is on the line, as the customer makes a mental image of the experience. If the initial impression is good, you have taken a big step toward developing an excellent customer service relationship. Look at your organization through the customer's eyes. Does your organization have a professional, polished appearance or one that changes from employee to employee? In order to have reliable service the organization must establish clear and reasonable written standards so your employees know how to direct their efforts. This sets an obvious expectation of service behavior and is where quality world-class service begins. Once clear standards are defined, how are your employees trained? Do they receive formal instruction integrating them into the organization or do they enter the organization cold and learn by example. By bringing employees on board with team training, new workers will understand the expectations of their



employment. World-class customer service is about developing long-term relationships with the customer.

Who is the customer?

We often think of the customer as the consumer or the person who utilizes our service or product. In an organization, however, anyone who depends on another employee to get their needs met and their job done is a customer, which means both internal and external customers. In an effort to meet their customer's needs, employees must understand the desired end result of their service, the important duties of their job, how each person is to perform the duties, what the standards are, how they apply to their position, and finally how their job relates to others in the organization. Communication skills are an imperative skill that will help employees provide world class service and function in a variety of situations. Workplace communications, conflict resolution, dealing with difficult people, stress management, listening skills and written communication skills all will benefit employees and help them to achieve world class customer satisfaction. \

When Problems Arise

An awareness of the organization and how to resolve customer concerns is an important ingredient. Too often a customer with a request or complaint is passed from one person or department to another. A recent call to a service provider resulted in being sent to six different people only to be sent back to the original person! No one knew who was responsible for the service in question and instead of finding out, just passed the caller on. Customers want action when they have a concern or question and employees need a template which explains how they can resolve issues. Someone in the organization needed to take ownership of this customer and work to resolve the issue. A customer concern should be seen as an opportunity to offer world class service.

First Impressions

What should happen when a consumer requests information about your organization while they are currently using the competition? This inquiry provides an opportunity for the acquisition of a new customer. A recent stop at a credit union has resulted in a consumer moving their financial affairs from an organization where they had done business for 28 years! Although the consumer had no complaints with their previous financial provider, world class service made the difference. Not only did the employee provide exceptional service, but offered to gather information for a service that their organization did not provide. From the moment the consumer entered the office, they felt valued and that made the difference. The new organization followed up with a phone call to make sure the person's needs had been met.



Customers need to see your organization as a cohesive team which functions flawlessly. What do your customers hear when they listen to the conversation of employees? Business people often talk as if no one will listen to their comments about their organization. Whether in an airport, elevator or business meeting, how employees discuss their organization influences the perception of the customer. Flip comments about coworkers, bosses or the organization can sway the relationship with a customer, as the customers' perception of the organization can improve or decline based on what they hear from coworker conversations or what employees tell them. Everything a consumer hears influences their perception of your organization and the type of service you will provide. When employees complain about their job, how much time is wasted doing work that is unnecessary, or criticize coworkers, the message indicates characteristics about your organization. When customers hear sarcastic comments about the bosses, what does this tell the consumer about how the organization operates? When they hear comments about coworkers, what does this tell the listener about the teamwork in the workplace? When the employee shares information regarding internal problems, what does that tell the customer about the organization? "I will have Jonathan get back to you, but right now he is up to his ears in problems with one of our best customers, so it may be a day or two before he can get back to you." That comment communicates that your organization is experiencing a lot of difficult problems that take a great deal of time to resolve.

Customer relationships are built on trust and satisfaction. Let your customers know they are appreciated and a priority. It is crucial, however, that employees only promise what they have the ability and authority to provide. Follow-up is essential so your purchaser knows you are following through with commitments. Often employees do not communicate with customers because they have not completed the work, but when things are not complete, a call or email to the consumer letting them know the status of their project is important. Communicating with former customers regarding situations and information which may be helpful to them could result in their return. When your organization makes changes in its services the customer should hear the news from you as this may eliminate anxiety or misinformation from being generated. Also, a communication referencing a previous conversation with a customer helps the consumer to feel valued.

The Bottom Line on Customer Service

How employees feel about their organization and how they are treated is the foundation for world class customer service. Employee satisfaction drives customer satisfaction. Wegman Food Market is a premier example of this strategy. Robert Wegman had a philosophy that has taken his organization from an underdog fighting against grocery chains to a 1994 story in the Wall Street Journal quoting supermarket industry analyst Neil Stern saying, "We consider them the best chain in the country, maybe the world." What took them from obscurity to world class status is their driving philosophy, "It is essential to treat customers and employees right." What



is it about Wegmans that makes it so special? When a person enters the store everything is impeccable and neatly arranged. They constantly think of ways to improve the business. Years ago the store received national attention because it offered a cafeteria, refrigerated food displays and vaporized water to keep the produce fresh, long before the competition had thought of those things. Need help finding something; you just need to ask an employee. Instead of pointing vaguely in a direction, the employee immediately walks you to the item and inquires if there is anything other way they can help you. The store is much larger than most grocery stores and arranged in an impressive layout. What brings people back to Wegmans is the experience. There are places for customers and employees to make suggestions to help improve the facility and Wegmans listens to their people and get ideas from all over the country. They try out ideas and if they don't work, they change course. They offer many services that the traditional market does not such as carry out service and transportation for elderly customers. Even Cher in Rochester, NY for a concert was impressed with the experience. After her opening concert number, her initial remarks were. "Hello Rochester... let's talk about Wegmans." She then went on for a few minutes describing her experience in the store and stating she had spoke with the owner to see if he would open one in California! That is not uncommon. In 2006, Wegmans received 4,885 requests from people asking the company to open a store in their area.

Employees enjoy many benefits from working at Wegmans. One of the first things Bob Wegman did when he took over as president was to give everyone a raise. He also improved benefits and now offers scholarships to students and has given nearly \$56 million dollars in scholarships to young employees. They also give back to the community and created a Work-Scholarship program which has been very successful at reducing the drop-out rate of at risk students. Wegmans does an exemplary job of creating a culture and company where people want to work. A recent talk with a part-time employee she said, "Every week the board is covered with things for the employees, such as information on healthy life styles, activities and ways to improve the quality of our lives." In 1995 when Wegmans was named Fortune Magazine's #1 Best company to work for, Bob Wegman responded, "This is the culmination of my life's work." The fact that this grocery store chain made 4.1 billion last year isn't a bad achievement either!

World class customer service does not happen by accident. You must build a winning team by putting quality into the design of everything you do. You must look at your business from the customer's perspective to determine how to exceed customer expectations. Finally, you must develop a culture and organizational climate that reflects how important your employees are and they must feel like a vital resource. Today, the competition your organization faces is global and changes on a daily basis. Only through consistent workplace communication can employees offer the world class service needed to survive.



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