



Customer Service, Looking Back, and Ahead.

STORY BY STEVE ZBRANEK

WHEN BUSINESSES THINK OF customer service, they imagine a problem developing with their product or service, and correcting the problem. For those of us who have been around for awhile, we remember full service gas stations, tipping the grocery store “sacker” for loading the groceries into the car and doctors that made house calls. Our Christmas card list included the names of our paperboy, milkman, letter carrier and dry cleaners delivery person. To some in the younger crowd, this sounds like the “Leave it to Beaver” days. Since I am old enough to have lived in both times, I wonder what happened.

Customer service today has become one of the least understood business philosophies. Consumers now expect to be disappointed. During every presentation I give on this topic I start by asking the crowd “How many of you have recently visited a business where the person serving you was either having a bad day or appeared to hate their job? Hands fly up eagerly with many hoping for the opportunity to tell their story. When in a classroom setting I ask everyone to write down the best and worst examples of customer service that they have recently experienced. Throughout the day each student (all adults) is given an opportunity to share both stories with the group. Not surprisingly, the bad stories are amazing and told with much emotion. The good stories are presented fairly but usually followed by amazement from the story teller and the class. As business owners, we have either taken our eye off the ball or we are watching the wrong ball.

Some business owners do not see that they have a problem. This is usually because if things rarely go wrong, people rarely complain. However, if your dry cleaning is always correct but the person at the counter makes you feel like you are imposing on them to check you out, you will be willing to switch. If your car is repaired properly but it takes 40 minutes to pick it up from the dealer, you are unhappy. Doing a good job isn't good enough anymore. The experience that a customer has in the transaction is almost more important than the transaction itself. In the “Leave it to Beaver” days, amazing customer service made up for the jobs that were not always done as well.

As businesses, we can do better. Excellent Customer Service has to be a corporate attitude that starts at the top. Owners need to remember that consumers are not a pain, they are the point. Most do. The problem arises when this attitude doesn't make it to the front line team. Workers today are often clock watchers, doing their time and planning how to spend their pay checks. Certainly not all, but enough so that almost everyone raises their hands when asked the bad mood, hate the job question above. On a recent trip to Maui, we arrived at our resort after 8 1/2 hours of flying to be greeted by a desk attendant seeming to have a bad day. He was grumpy, curt and almost rude. Does this story shock anyone reading this article? We have dozens just like it.

Savvy business owners know that the least expensive customer to get is the one that you already have. In today's economy everyone is looking for buyers. Your buyers. Keeping current customers happy costs much less than advertising for new ones. Constant training is the key. Everyone must be on board and encouraged to think of things that will produce an exceptional customer experience. Growing up, the milkman would leave an extra bottle of chocolate milk at our doorstep when it was my birthday. I have forgotten many people through the years, but I remember him. People are easily pleased by the smallest, unexpected gesture or benefit. Our customers will brag about exceptional service because it's so rare.

Looking ahead I believe that we can all do a better job in this area. Owners and managers should make customer service training part of their recruiting and marketing plan. Workers who can't get on board should be isolated from customers or given an opportunity to find a new team. Every contact with a customer should be seen as a touch point, a chance to make a favorable impression and create a positive experience. Touch points happen on the telephone, through a service window, across a counter, in a parking lot, behind a desk, in a waiting room and a hundred other places where customers interact with our company. As consumers we can help as well. Let business owners know when you receive exceptional service, and when you don't. We all want to do a good job in this area and most of us think that we are. But, what we think doesn't matter.

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