

Customer service – yeah right?

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Delivering good customer service is a priority in every business, right? We all know the importance of retaining the clients that we currently service in addition to finding new ones. We know that the cost is much greater to find and secure new business in comparison to the cost of keeping our current stable of clients. Customer service has the power to aid in this situation or make it impossible. One of the major problems our industry faces today is defining exactly what “good” customer service is. If we are truthful with ourselves, we might admit that we struggle to define this extremely broad concept. Furthermore, we may tend to draft the standard on customer service based on our biases – most of which come from retail experiences. The delivery of customer service is only called “good” if the client receives value from the exchange. Think of all the different types of customer service offerings that our clients experience today — their experiences range from the industrial sector all the way to the retail world. Consider how each of these experiences is measured in the client’s mind. Take, for example, an evening meal at a high-end steak house. What are the expectations in reference to a quality customer service experience? We may desire a nice wine list or an experienced wait staff or even off-menu selections. All of these are expected due to the location and the pricing at such an establishment. Now consider the expectation at a fast food chain. Would we race away from the drive thru window in a huff if they were out of our favorite Merlot? Of course not! However, there may be a common denominator to both experiences – the curbing of appetite.

In the industrial world, we sometimes take the high-end steak house approach without understanding the value our clients place on this level of service. I believe there are two key questions that we need to answer:

- What does “good” customer service look like to our clients?
- How do we measure and ultimately deliver this level of service to our clients?

First things first: What does it look like?

Prior to changing our customer service offerings, we need to know a couple of key items

- What are our clients complaining about (opportunities) and what do they value?
- What does the customer service continuum look like?

Addressing the first question may be more difficult than we think! How can we find out what our clients are complaining about and what they value? One of the most overlooked areas is closest to us - ask our clients. I know this is scary territory – but actually asking our clients is a great way to get critical information about how we are delivering customer service, in addition to understanding new service offerings that can be provided. What scares most individuals is the thought that we may be opening up a can of worms. But if we are serious about improvement, knowing our current status is the most critical step.

In collecting information, consider using a client board - sometimes called a Business Advisory Forum, Client Forum or Focus Groups. These meetings are

best run by an outside individual who facilitates and keeps the group on task. He or she should keep the meetings directed and short but allow ample time for clients to discuss key issues.

Another way to find out what our clients are complaining about and what they value lies within our own companies. Key areas of our own operation provide a fertile ground for understanding clients' complaints and opportunities. Consider spending quality time with our counter people, drivers, book keepers and accountants. These individuals can share some of the intimate details about our clients and we can learn a tremendous amount by watching them in action. A couple of examples of questions to ask are:

- What are clients saying about us, and our competition?
- How many credits have we issued in the past month, quarter, year?

Yogi Berra, the great Yankee ballplayer, was dead on when he said, "You can observe a lot just by watching!"

In reviewing our own company, our goal should be two fold:

- Stop or decrease corrective actions due to controllable errors.
- Begin implementing preventive tactics to reduce future issues.

The second key item we need to answer is what does the customer service continuum look like? To put it in practical terms, how do we define bad, good and excellent? Consider any client complaint who comes to our attention; more specifically, a late delivery complaint. The client lets us know in no uncertain terms that the delivery is four hours past the promised time.

In this example, what is unacceptable (bad) or out of tolerance? Certainly we would agree that not delivering at all would be catastrophic. Delivering hours past the promised or requested time might be "bad." In this case, "good" might be delivering within a tolerance of plus or minus one hour of the client request while "excellent" might be an early delivery where it aids our client's situation. For this issue, it is important to determine what the continuum looks like – this ultimately becomes our upper and lower specification limits. While we have used words (bad, good, excellent) to describe the continuum, numerical values can be used to define these limits.

We know what it looks like — Now how do we implement?

The options available to each of us for customer service training are endless. Just open Monday's mail and you'll find more seminar flyers than ants at a spring picnic. A large number of these seminars are really strong in teaching techniques that are utilized in the **retail** world – but very few address how we coach our employees in an industrial setting. If we merely define what our clients are complaining about and begin measuring them there probably won't be a significant change in our businesses. To truly impact our businesses we need behavior change in those that have contact with our clients. In order to change behavior we need to not only measure, but be able to digest the findings and produce coaching material.

What kind of coaching material can come from this exercise? First, consider having key groups within your organization begin creating possible solutions to client complaints. One option is to have a drivers' group meet 30 minutes prior to the workday to address late deliveries. Another idea is to have functional individuals attend the client board meetings – to get not only the facts but the

essence of the issue. Long term, we can even tie compensation to this most critical area of our business.

Take the continuum measurement and create charts that show in and out of tolerance. An industrial company in Houston does this and updates them every week – showing where they have come from and the current trends in their customer service.

It is truly a daunting task to begin changing our view of our customer service. However, it is not an impossible task. We know a few key facts:

- The level of client expectations tomorrow is likely to be higher than today.
- In general, it costs more to replace clients lost to poor customer service than it does to keep them.
- Customer service is a critical component to keeping clients loyal.

Remember, business isn't for the faint of heart – it is hard but rewarding work!
Hard work pays off!

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