

Bet You're Not Really Providing Great Customer Service

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If someone asked you what your business does, what would you say? If you are like most business people, you would respond with something about your core offering. You'd say, "We are a bookstore." "We provide health care to the community." "We offer the finest selection of organic foods." And then, if you are really into customer service, you might add, ". . . and we provide great customer service." Note that customer service is rarely the first thing mentioned. Instead, it tends to come after the word "and." That makes customer service an addition, an add-on, an addendum to the business. And something that is an addition is often viewed as less important. It's not the main focus. And as an addition, it is often the first area to be ignored or cut if time or money becomes tight. That is why the following concept is so important:

You can't provide great customer service if you consider it an addition to your business.

Customer service is not an addition to your business. It *is* your business. It is an integral part of everything you do. Here is my definition:

Customer service is any action a business undertakes that is designed to meet the needs of its customers.

That is a very broad definition. It means that customer service is how you design your products and service offerings, how you deliver them, how you communicate with customers and how you make them feel. It is an integral part of everything you do. Unfortunately, this is not the way most businesses think. And it affects how retail stores and services operate.

Where is Customer Service?

Go into a large retail store. Approach someone from the store about an issue, and what will they likely say? "Oh, you want the Customer Service Department. It's over there. They can help you." We've all had that experience. But there is a problem with having a department labeled as "Customer Service." It suggests to the employees that customer service is something that only a select group of them need to work with—the employees off in a corner in a separate department. It demonstrates a philosophy that customer service is mainly handling returns, exchanges and complaints when it is really so much more. *Real* customer service (based on the definition given above) should be the concern of *everyone* in the organization, not just one department, and that message needs to be clearly communicated to all employees. (Yes, it can make sense to have a separate area for the return of goods or exchanges. Just don't call it the "Customer Service Department.")

What is Your Goal?

Many businesses further hurt their customer service performance by defining good customer service as a goal they are trying to achieve.

Customer service is not a goal to be achieved. It is a system that must be monitored and improved.

Goals are defined and achieved, and victory is declared. Systems, on the other hand, are ongoing, have to be constantly monitored and can almost always be improved. So rather than viewing customer service as a goal, you should look at it as a *system*. It is a system, involving planning,

people and process, that is established to achieve your ultimate goal of winning more customers and a greater share of their spending. Further, it is a system that every company has established, whether they think about it or not. Some have a good one, many don't, but they all have one. If your business has customers (and, of course, it does), then you have a customer service system *automatically*. The question is, do you really understand your service system and how it works with your customers so that it is functioning at its best?

It Affects Your Profits

Why is understanding your customer-service system important? Because:

Customer service is a potential profit generator.

When done properly, investing in customer service can provide excellent returns. Small investments in service can have a large effect on customers' feelings toward your business. If customers like your service, you are likely to get a greater share of their spending.

And what happens if your service is poor? Say a couple with two young children moves to a community and needs a dentist. Think of what that family is worth over the next ten years to the dentist they select. If one of the parents becomes upset with service received (e.g., staff are not pleasant, appointments are not on time), he or she can take the entire family away. Think of all that lost revenue. But we're not done. Since most people pick their dentist based on recommendations, this family has the potential to advise away many other families. And the dissatisfied family, as well as all the others they talk to, will now go to competitors and *strengthen them*. That's a huge loss for our poor dentist, or any other business to which this happens. Don't let anyone tell you that customer service doesn't directly affect the bottom line.

In Summary

So let's recap:

- You can't provide great customer service if you consider it an addition to your business. Instead, you should consider customer service to be any action your business undertakes that is designed to meet the needs of your customers.
- Customer service is not a goal to be achieved. It is a system that must be monitored and improved.
- Customer service is a potential profit generator.

Change your philosophy on customer service and watch how your bottom line is improved.

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