

Are you chasing customers away?



During time spent doing research for a customer experience seminar, the topic - how to treat customers to build loyalty and keep them coming back - became more than a small blip on my radar screen. It became top of mind with me. My radar scope moved to High Alert for recognizing bad... no, miserable... customer service and experiences. I wish I could say there are equal amounts of good and bad service and experiences, but sadly, the *bad* experiences seem to greatly outnumber the *good*, and even the *mediocre* examples.

Everyone likes to say they have excellent customer service and provide exceptional customer experiences, but it isn't true by a long shot. A friend recently went out to a family style restaurant with a colleague for a late lunch. They walked in the door around 2:00 PM, only to be met by a view of the top of the hostess's head, looking down at something behind that hostess desk. The restaurant was virtually empty with more than a few open tables where they could have been quickly seated. After standing in the lobby several minutes, unacknowledged, the hostess finally looked up. My friend said: "*Two, please.*" The hostess responded: "*Name, please?*" as if she had to put them on a waiting list!

No one else was waiting, plenty of tables were available, but the hostess felt compelled to put them through the paces of a customer walking into a crowded entry area on a busy Friday evening. Her actions made absolutely no sense at all. The important point is: what impression did this experience have on the customers? Needless to say, it was not a good impression. Clearly, the customers' experience was not exceptional or even mediocre. Instead of taking the customers' time and convenience into account, she instead went into 'process' mode.

Is Your Customer Service and Experience Exceptional?

Do you let company policies and systems get in the way of making a customer's experience dealing with you positive? When you wrote company policies and procedures, were they focused on making things easy for you and your staff to get jobs done, creating a necessary paper trail? Or, are your policies and processes focused on making it easy for customers to do business with you? My guess is that your focus was on the internal perspective, not the external, which is the much more important customers' point of view.

Often a customer walks through your door, set on making a purchase. Unfortunately, these willing customers, ready to buy, encounter road blocks to making it happen. Or, even after a sale, the customer has a question or problem which can be easily dealt with, still saving that excellent level of customer service. Plenty of time left for a save; even making the customer pleased enough to share their experience with a few friends. How are you doing so far?

Make Decisions Based on a Customer's Perspective, Not Your Own.

When you opted for that automated phone answering system, who did you do it for? Your customers, who have nothing better to do with their valuable time than sit on the phone listening to option after option... *push 1 for... push 2 for... push 3 for...*? All they really want is to make contact with a live human being who can help them. Do you offer that company directory of names without titles or job descriptions that are useless to anyone outside of your staff? My guess is that like most, you put in that system to save a few dollars you'd have to pay a warm, friendly human being to man your switchboard. That human life line could actually be helpful and attentive to your customers, quickly connect them to those who can quickly resolve their issues and make their customer experience positive.

Review Policies and Procedures from a Customer's Point of View.

Without satisfied customers, you won't have a business or policies to worry about. Well-known management consultant, educator, and author Peter Drucker once said: *The purpose of business is to create and keep a customer.* The purpose for business is not to make widgets, provide a service, provide jobs or save the world or the environment. It's about finding customers who will exchange their money for your products or services. Those other things are merely elements that support creating and keeping that customer relationship.

Keeping a customer waiting, either in person or on the telephone is not going to keep them coming back. Nor will taking days to respond to e-mail or voice mail inquiries. It's time to look at company policies and procedures from an outside point of view. Make necessary changes that will improve your customers' experience and set you apart from competitors. In today's tight economy, differentiating yourself through exceptional customer service and experiences is not just *something* you can do; it is *THE* thing to do.

Make exceptional customer service your company's highest priority strategy.

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