



Ensuring Customer Service Quality

Published: August 2005 – *Workforce Performance Solutions Magazine*

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By 1980, “Star Wars” had taken the movie-going public by storm—and in the business world, the “Quality Wars” had begun. Successful businesses learned a major lesson: When you compete in an arena where customers no longer tolerate poor-quality products, it’s essential to get employees actively involved and improve their ability to deliver quality products.

If only we had truly learned that lesson. Today, good product and competitive pricing have become the bare minimum required just to get into the game. Winning and losing have become functions of the “human factor” that sets the tone for the customer. To a significant degree, the levels of sustained profitability, repeat business and enthusiastic referrals that an organization achieves depend on the quality of the customer’s experience. For most customers, the defining moment is the point of interaction with people.

The Human Factor

Customers view employee performance as a major piece of the value they are buying in a product or service. In the customer’s eyes, employees are on stage, and they need to perform at their very best, every day. Employees are evaluated by customers at every direct or indirect interaction. From the customer’s point of view:

- Employee performance is a significant piece of what the customer is buying.
- Employee performance represents the character and culture of an organization.

Therefore, the human factor is the customer’s experience. This may sound like old-fashioned common sense, but it’s definitely not common practice. Eight out of 10 stories that customers relate about poor or great business experiences deal with the human factor—the quality of the interaction between the customer and the employee.

Relying on customer relationship management (CRM) systems, technology and operational systems—all noteworthy considerations—management has taken its collective eye off the ball. In order to create an exceptional customer experience, reliable systems must be in place to support people. However, while important, any system is in jeopardy when people in the system lack the proper attitude and skill sets necessary to make it work. This is what customers experience routinely: well-designed systems that should work, but don’t, because they are not supported by excellent human performance.

Routine Experiences

We recently sat through a two-hour-long business strategy discussion with the department heads of one organization. They were itemizing the results they desired and expected from their business strategy. The list contained the usual suspects: profit percentage, sales volume, reduced costs, low prices from vendors and suppliers, and so on.

As the meeting was concluding, we asked simply, “And what do your customers need when they choose to do business with you?” What followed was silence, followed by the normal rationalizations regarding the importance of customers.

At another meeting with a different organization, which was held to assess the cause of rapidly dropping customer satisfaction scores, we listened as employee after employee said things like the following as management struggled to understand how customer satisfaction could be dropping:

- “They just don’t understand how much we have to deal with on a daily basis.”
- “They have to understand that we do other things besides cater to them.”
- “They have no patience. When they want something, they expect us to drop whatever we’re doing.”

This was a customer service group! These employees didn’t just have their eye off the ball—they weren’t even on the playing field. When you are investigating customer satisfaction, you might want to try to see the world through the customer’s eyes. Why is the customer experience so often disregarded?

Be the Customer

In Marcus Buckingham’s book, “The One Thing You Need to Know,” he calls for a leadership focus on controlling insights. One way to think about this is to see controlling insights as the best explanation of most events, and as a focus that gives your actions the most influence. With so many things on the performance plate, employees need to know what is central to the success of the organization. To leave customer satisfaction off of the list of performance goals and standards leaves the human factor to absolute chance.

Regarding customer loyalty, one of the best controlling insights comes from the words of Feargal Quinn, owner of SuperQuinn, a chain of supermarkets and shopping centers in Ireland: “Be the customer.” Quinn also adds context to his controlling insight. “You need to think like a customer,” Quinn said. “You need to be able to wear the customer’s hat, to walk in their shoes. You need to get a feel for the customer. In a real sense, you need to be able to become a customer.”

Being the customer does not mean documenting the time customers stand in line and then returning to an office and writing a memo or e-mail to someone about its length. Getting yourself and your employees into the customer’s shoes requires actually standing in the particular line with all the variables that are present for the customer.

When you experience your organization with all the normal and real customer variables present, then you understand at an emotional level, the true impact on the customer. Employee knowledge, training, attitude, initiative, courtesy, respect and follow-through are all substantially different when you truly try to be the customer. It forces you to put your money where your mouth is when it comes to making proclamations about the importance of the customer.

Action

To customers, human performance makes a considerable difference. Whether we pay attention or not, the customer will vote with their money and their word-of-mouth on your business’s behalf.

In many ways, it is hard to believe that so many organizations can ignore something that is at the root of their profitability. Believing and talking about being customer-focused in one thing. Delivering a great customer experience is another. Acting on controlling insights is a good approach. Here are some steps to take:

- Set clear performance expectations and standards regarding the customer's experience.
- Provide consistent, routine and daily management attention to those expectations and standards.
- Provide genuine leadership enthusiasm for the quality of the customer's experience—and make it an explicit agenda, not a hidden one.

Can Training Help?

Providing managers and employees with a customer-experience-based education process is a critical path to success, and gives management a great opportunity to set clear expectations for employees regarding the quality of the customer's experience. Management can use the training experience to clarify relevant performance issues and remove any doubts about what is expected from employees when interacting with customers. If an employee drops the ball on customer service issues after the training, the conversation between leader and employee takes on a much different tone and context.

The organization also gets a higher return from face-to-face performance conversations between manager and employee. Once an employee has been through the appropriate training, failure to demonstrate an acceptable level of subject knowledge, failure to make proper choices in customer situations or failure to use sound judgment based on what was taught in the training become performance issues that can be managed.

Key elements for creating a customer-driven culture include:

- Measuring the knowledge and concepts the learner acquires from training. This can be done through tests or scenario analysis.
- Measuring the quality of decision-making skills with regard to customer situations. This can be done through scenario analysis and evaluation of on-the-job decisions the employee makes in situations relevant to the subject trained.
- Using the training experience to set clear expectations for employees regarding their responsibility and actions with customers. This will change the tone and context of conversations regarding employee performance.
- Ensuring that the major issues addressed during the training become consistent areas of employee accountability after the training. Management attention and follow-through is the best tool to ensure the transference of what is learned in training to application on the job.

Sidebar - The Cost of Absurdity

We are in the midst of a customer revolution—a revolt against the insanity, silliness and disrespect of poor employee encounters. For those who ignore the message, here is a story for those organizations that seem to revel in the world of the absurd.

In search of an ice cream cone, we went to visit an ice cream vendor of renowned reputation. A young clerk behind the counter gave us a pleasant greeting and inquired as to what flavor we would like. We replied that we needed a minute to decide. While pondering the selections through the glass counter, another employee behind the counter came over to the young clerk and said something. Then the young clerk returned and said, "I'm sorry, but I forgot. In order to get served, you'll have to take a number."

Amused, as we were the only customers in the store, we asked why we had to take a number when there were no other customers present. The young clerk replied, "I'm sorry folks, but it's our

policy.” We politely replied that we had that part figured out, but that we wanted to know why the policy was being used at this moment.

After receiving a blank stare, we further inquired as to why the store used a numbering system at any time.

The clerk shrugged, so we asked if the numbering system was put in place to ensure that no customer would be served out of turn. The young employee replied that this was, indeed, the case. We then pointed out that we would definitely be served in turn as nobody else was present. Again, we were informed that we had to take a number to get served.

We asked to speak to the manager, hoping that perhaps someone with some “authority” could grant us a waiver. We asked the manager why we had to jump through this silly hoop in order to give this store money for its product. We were curtly informed that we must take a number to get served because that was the way the store processed customers.

“Processed?”

Having exhausted all alternatives, we took a number. The young clerk, embarrassingly, with the supervisor watching closely, called out, “21 please.” Amazed, we just stared at her and said nothing. She then said, “I can help you now.” We asked, “Are you speaking to us?” Confused, the young clerk responded, “Of course, you’re the only customers here.” We conceded, “That’s the point we’ve have been trying to make!”

Holding our ground we continued to stare at the clerk. After moments of silence, she asked us if we still wanted ice cream and, if so, what flavor. We said we knew but couldn’t tell her yet. When she asked why not, we asked her if, according to policy, all customers had to be served in turn. When she said they did, we showed her our number—24.

What’s the cost of this sort of customer service policy? With the customer, the damage has been done. “Processing” leaves such a terrible aftertaste. And what about the employee? How long will management insist on implementing policies that management doesn’t have to work under, doesn’t have to take the grief for, and that continue to drive employees and customers crazy? How long will an employee tolerate awkward situations before they move on or just give up?

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