

Customer Service

By Tammy Potosky

Customers...we all have customers. Whether they are people that frequent our store, people we provide a service or sell products to, co-workers that we work with in our organization, students that we teach, parents that we must deal with or even people for whom we do volunteer work for. Everyone has customers. Where would we be without our customers? If we had no customers, there would be no need for us to do what we do.

What is a customer? The definition of a customer from the American Heritage Dictionary is "One that buys goods or services"; "An individual with whom one must deal with." Why is it then that people providing customer service do not seem to realize that they hold their own success, and that of their company, in their hands? As we define customers, we must keep in mind that although we all have customers, we ARE all customers at various points in time. Have you been to a store and the salesperson is rude or indifferent? I'm sure we've all experienced this before and we walk away wondering why we would even give such a store our business.

Now that we've defined customers and identified that we, too, are customers, let's move on to define customer service. What is customer service? Here's a real situation that happened recently that surely defines what customer service is not.

We were recently in one of the major electronics stores looking for a big screen TV that we have been planning to purchase. Most of these stores have the lower priced TV's in the back of the store and typically have the higher priced TV's in a separate area called the "home theater" section. This particular store's home theater section was a separate room in the corner of the store. While I was looking at something else with my children, my husband had gone to the home theater section to look at the TV's. A little while later he returned announcing he had found the one he wanted. Imagine that, a man finding just the right big screen TV at the first place we looked! (I do have to admit that we've been talking about making this purchase for quite some time, so in all fairness to my husband, he has done his research.) So we joined my husband so he could show us what he thought would be the best fit for our lives in regard to a new TV. Upon entering this room with all sorts of big screen TV's I noticed there were five employees behind the customer service area of this room. All five men were engaged in conversation with each other. Not a problem, right? Well, my husband proceeded to show me what his selection would be, then on to what his choice would be if only we had a bit more money to spend, and then back to what fit our budget. All the while the employees continued their conversations. We spent at least 15-20 minutes in that home theater area. Not once were we acknowledged; not once were we asked if we needed any assistance; not once were we even looked at. Here we were, in the high priced TV section of this electronics store, five employees standing around talking to each other, a customer with money in their pocket willing to spend it and there is no customer service. As is my nature, I notice these things. I am put off by such indifference if I'm going to spend my hard earned money. I expect good customer service if I'm going to be a consumer. Needless to say I

told my husband that we should leave; it was fine with him as he wanted to get a price from another store before making our final decision (we try to be informed consumers). As it happened, as we gathered our kids away from the big screen with “Pirates of the Caribbean” playing and were walking out of the home theater section, two of the five employees were also walking out. One man asked if we needed any help. My response was, “No, not at this point, we don’t.” The other man with him said if we did to let them know. I kindly informed him that no, we wouldn’t be needing their help and that I hope they enjoyed their conversation. (All this to my husband’s chagrin I’m afraid.) Although the decision had already been made that we would never purchase from this store because of what just occurred, we figured while we were there we’d walk over to see the smaller TVs. We were only in this department for a minute or so when a young man came up and asked if we needed any help. I thanked him but told him we were only looking and he gave us his name and said if we needed anything to just ask. At that point I was thinking, now this is how customer service should be. I have to admit though that I was a little skeptical. So I walked a couple aisles down to where the customer service desk in this department was and saw that the young man was speaking with the two gentlemen that just walked out of the home theater section and I had, in a way, chastised. The bottom line? Too little, too late. Because these five employees were so engrossed in their own conversation, they lost a big sale. I would bet these guys don’t work on commission so I guess they’re just not motivated to provide any customer service ... or their conversation was really good!

To most people, customer service is a high priority. People expect good customer service if they are engaged in a transaction with you. Studies show that people will always talk about bad customer service before they talk about good customer service. When is the last time you heard someone tell you of a good experience? I bet it was probably longer than you can remember. I, too, am guilty of spreading a bad experience but I also try to balance it when I have a good experience as well.

At around this same time as the incident with the TV, I called one of the local office supply stores with a question on whether they had a particular item in stock. The woman that answered the phone was very polite, asked how she could help, took the information, confirmed that she had taken down the right information so as to ensure the quality of the service she was providing and asked if it was okay to put me on hold. I agreed and she put me on hold. After holding for several minutes she actually came back on the line to inform me that they were still looking and she would get right back to me. I thanked her and as I was on hold I thought “Now this is great customer service!” When she did come back and told me they didn’t have what I needed, I inquired if she thought another store would have the item and she provided me with the information. She was not annoyed, not hurried, but rather very helpful and polite. This made all the difference in the world to me. I went online and placed the order with this store rather than going to another office supply store because of this positive experience. Oh, by the way, the office supply store is Office Depot.

So back to my original question of “What is customer service?” The ACA Group, a customer service consulting and training company in California, defines customer service

as “the ability of an organization to constantly and consistently give the customer what they want and need.” The ACA Group further defines "excellent" customer service as “the ability of an organization to constantly and consistently exceed the customer's expectations.” As a customer, my expectation is to always receive excellent customer service but I can accept mediocre customer service and be content. However, when I receive excellent customer service you can be sure I'll be back. And isn't that the goal to being successful; to keep our customers wanting our services; wanting to continue to do business with us; partnering with us whenever they have a need we can fulfill? Don't we want to be the first one our customer thinks of when they have a need we can fulfill? I know I do and I hope that my dedication to my customers shows in my dedication and commitment to each and every one of my clients. Part of my commitment of customer service comes from my own personal values. I always hope that I show the utmost respect and concern for my clients (and all people that I interact with) and their needs.

Showing people common courtesy and respect will oftentimes provide the feeling of customer service to individuals. This in itself causes a positive experience as we all like to feel good about our interactions with others. My hope is that this article has heightened your awareness of your customers and the customer service you provide. Whether you recognized yourself before as providing customer service or not, I hope you realize now that we all provide customer service in some capacity. I also hope that your turn as the customer is most often a positive experience and that you use both the positive and negative experiences as learning opportunities.

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