

## Chapter 17 – Customer Service

***“There is only one boss: the customer. And he can fire everybody from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money elsewhere.” -Sam Walton***

The old adage used to be that an unhappy customer would tell ten people. In this time of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media, that is no longer the case. Now, an unhappy customer can tell millions! Take the case of Dave Carrol (from [assetbasedmarketing.com](http://assetbasedmarketing.com)) “On July 6, 2009 Canadian musician David Carroll and his band, Sons of Maxwell, blew the lid off that rule by uploading a song onto YouTube that chronicled a real-life experience of how his \$3,500 Taylor guitar was broken during a trip on United Airlines in 2008. At the end of the first day the number of views totaled 150,000 and three days later on July 9, it had amassed 500,000 hits, 5 million by mid-August.” We all know good (and bad) customer service when we see it. And we love to tell the stories to our family and friends. Well guess what, *your* customers do the same thing! The point is that a good understanding of quality customer service can make all of the difference.

How can we ensure that our customers are getting the level of service that they want and deserve?

### **The Golden Rule**

The Golden Rule reminds us to treat others the way that we would want to be treated. Every company, organization, and facility should have core principles that drive their customer service strategy. Some examples are:

- Speed
- Quality
- Customer Satisfaction
- Integrity

Take a look at some of your policies and procedures to see if they follow the core principles of your organization and facility. Sometimes we are stuck with directives that we can't change, but that doesn't mean that you can't showcase exceptional customer service within those directives.

The customer is not really “always right,” but the customer *is* always the customer!

### **S.M.I.L.E**

There are several acronyms for the word smile. You can really adapt it to fit your specific needs; however, these principles from SIM Professional Development are universally sound and work across many different customer service situations.

**Smile** – A welcome smile can go a long way toward making the customer feel welcome and comfortable in your facility. It also reflects back to the Golden Rule and treating others how you would like to be treated. This also holds true for customer service interactions over the phone. They can hear the smile in your voice!

**Manage** – Manage customer expectations effectively. Become known for your knowledgeable

and friendly staff. Follow through on what you advertise. This should also be in line with your core mission and values.

**Influence** – Your attitude and the attitude of the employees that interact with the customers can and will influence their behavior and their experience. It can also create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable and enjoy their experience.

This excerpt from Dale Carnegie’s “How to Win Friends and Influence People” gives great tips on enhancing relationships:

#### Become a Friendlier Person

1. Don’t criticize, condemn, or complain.
2. Give honest, sincere appreciation.
3. Arouse in the other person an eager want.
4. Become genuinely interested in other people.
5. Smile.
6. Remember that a person’s name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.
7. Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.
8. Talk in terms of the other person’s interests.
9. Make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.

**Listen** - Pick up verbal cues and understand the customers’ thoughts. Listen and then paraphrase and recap to ensure understanding and alignment of goals with your customer. Try not to make assumptions, and understand facts vs. feelings.

**Engage** – Engage customers and ask effective questions to find out their real needs.

### **Communication**

Don’t let confusion stand in the way of a great customer experience. Communication is key. Whether it is the signage in your facility or the way a customer is greeted by staff and management, great communication will set you apart from your competition. This includes great communication for customers who wish to make a complaint. Make it easy for them to come to you to give you a chance to resolve the issue and satisfy their dispute. You will keep their business without the negative word of mouth.

Show customers what you have to offer. You can do this with signage, menus, flyers, posters, email, social media, and by generating word of mouth. Often the customers don’t realize what is available on their installation. For example, you might be able to provide an events calendar with coupons when someone new is assigned to your installation. Communicate non-verbally by showing your pride in your facility. Keep it clean and organized with an easy layout and flow. It also instills a sense of pride with employees and gives them a more enjoyable workspace.

“Do you have a central place for customer questions and answers? If not, start today to build

it! The Web is a natural customer service hub, so make sure everyone in your agency knows they should use your website as the definitive place to find answers to customer questions. Boilerplates are great: Develop a list or database of the most frequently asked questions (and answers) that come into your office via phone, email, or the Web—and make sure that everyone in your agency who responds to questions knows how to find it, and uses it to respond to customer inquiries.” (howto.gov)

Last and maybe most importantly, don't forget internal communication with your employees and staff members. Make them aware of your core mission, vision and values and instill a sense of pride in carrying those forward to the customer. Employees feel empowered to make quality decisions if they are informed of company policy and culture. One of the most talked about customer service experiences that most people hold as the “gold standard” is Disney. Every employee, from maintenance workers to food service to Cinderella, is trained to be friendly and to know the answers to commonly asked questions, even if it isn't in their area. They are trained to communicate and to keep their customers happy and informed.

## **Feedback**

There is only one way to know what your customers and potential customers really want: ask them! Here are a few ways to collect that information:

- ✓ Talk to your customers – There is no better feedback than what the customer says at the time of their experience. If they feel your menu board is too difficult to read or the sale sign isn't clearly marked, fix the problem and note the changes for the future.
- ✓ Web or social media comments – Take advantage of this free service with big reach and poll your customers about what they want, need, and enjoy at your facility. Also check it frequently to see if customers have made comments or left feedback. Resist the urge to immediately delete a negative comment; it can be a great opportunity to publicly acknowledge a problem and show great customer service in your response.
- ✓ Suggestion Box - The suggestion box is old fashioned perhaps, but well understood. Place it somewhere convenient, and provide plenty of blank forms and pens. Then check it every day or two, and be sure to provide feedback if they gave you contact information.
- ✓ Customer Comment Card - Customer comment cards are typically provided where the customer is paying for the bill. They might be part of a table tent on a dining room table, or on the counter at the craft shop. Some installations have installed customer service kiosks at prime locations in certain facilities to make it easier for customers to leave their comments.
- ✓ Formal Surveys - Sometimes you can get useful information through sending out a formal survey. Free services are available on line, or you can hire a company that specializes in conducting surveys. To get responses, make it easy for your customers to fill out the survey and submit it online or turn it in. Keep it short and simple.
- ✓ Informal interviews – Managers should take time to be out on the floor with the customers. One of the most effective ways of getting real customer feedback is by having the manager available to talk to the customers. The smart manager will then make notes so that action

can be taken.

- ✓ Mystery Shoppers - There are professional services that provide mystery shoppers, or you can organize your own, perhaps through the spouses clubs, or another on post organization. Mystery shoppers basically use your facilities as though they were a regular customer, but they look for specific problems and keep scrupulous notes.
- ✓ Focus Group - A focus group is a small group representing different demographics within your customer mix. Their conversations are normally directed towards specific areas upon which you want feedback.

Recognize that for every person who offers a suggestion or comment, there are probably at least twenty who don't. There was a restaurant that had customer comment cards on every table, with golf pencils conveniently located and a box to drop them in as customers left. But the most effective feedback system was the manager, who was always on the floor, watching both employees and customers, feeling the air conditioning/heating, observing the lighting, paying attention to the leftovers being picked up by the bus personnel, and talking to the customers.

The information gleaned from informal observations like these, which statisticians call, "anecdotal," cannot be quantified as easily as surveys or comment cards. But an effective manager can turn this information into success. Once you get information from a customer about what he or she wants, always provide feedback to them if you possibly can. Let them know that you have heard what they have to say.

## **Conflict Resolution**

Complaints and conflict are a big part of customer service. No matter how great your service or how fantastic your facility, there is no way to please all of your customers 100% of the time. Having a plan in place and learning how to appropriately deal with complaints and conflicts will keep even the pickiest customers coming back for more. Here are eight steps to conflict resolution from the Dale Carnegie Institute:

1. Greet - Always answer the phone or greet people in person as though you are happy to hear from them. Begin in a friendly way. This is easy to say, but can be difficult to do. We need to be able to "live in day-tight compartments" and separate previous negative experiences from this customer contact.
2. Listen - We often get the same kinds of complaints, so it becomes challenging to really listen to people. Give them an opportunity to vent some of their frustration. Be empathetic. Listen for facts and feelings. Resist the temptation to start responding too quickly. Show signs of active listening, like brief interjections or clarifying questions.
3. Questions - Ask questions to clarify the concern. Again, we need to resist responding until we understand people and their issues.
  - a. Elementary questions capture the basic facts of the problem. This gives us an opportunity to take some of the emotion out of the complaint.
  - b. Elaborative questions gather more details. This gives the customer a chance to

expand on their issues and feelings. These questions should be relatively short, to encourage the customer to talk more.

c. Evaluative questions help us gain an understanding of the severity of the issue, in the mind of the customer. This is also where we evaluate what will satisfy the customer.

4. Empathize - Find a point of agreement with the person. This does not necessarily mean that we agree with the complaint. This is where we show the customer that we heard and understood their concern, and we recognize that it is important to them.

5. Address the Issue - Now that the emotional issues have been addressed, do everything in your power to resolve the practical aspects of the complaint. Take responsibility for the actions of your organization. This is your opportunity to turn a lemon into lemonade. People who have their problems successfully resolved tend to continue to do business with you.

6. Test Questions - Ask questions to test how well you have resolved the emotional and practical sides of the complaint. Give the customer another opportunity to talk. Be a good listener.

7. Offer Additional Help - Ask what else you can do for this customer. This allows an opportunity to turn the conversation away from the complaint, which makes it easier to end on a positive note.

8. Follow Through - Often, complaints cannot be resolved completely on the first point of contact. If you need to get back to the customer, do so quickly and thoroughly. Even if the complaint has been resolved, create a reason to contact the customer again. For example, find a way to give added value. Also, look for ways to solve the root causes of problems within your organization.

## **Commitment to Quality**

Customer service starts at the top. If management is not fully committed to quality, it will be difficult to create a positive customer service attitude throughout the organization.

If *you* are committed to quality in everything that you say and do, you will be able to train your employees to follow suit. When the entire organization is excited about providing the highest quality at every level, customers will notice.

Our service members and their families want to feel that these are *their* operations and activities. Pay attention to their needs, whether expressed specifically, through kudos or complaints, or whether inferred by their attendance or avoidance of your activities.

## **Integrity**

*Integrity* is more than just honesty or being fair. It includes operating consistently with one's system of values, and the more that you can demonstrate integrity in your management style, the more you will command respect from everyone. This should also reinforce the point of customer service according to the core mission, vision, and values of your organization.

## **Educate**

Good customer service includes providing useful and practical information to the customer. For

example, if a customer wants to serve alcohol at a reception, there are rules and regulations that must be followed. This information can be presented as a problem, or presented as helpful information on the road to satisfying the customer's needs.

### **Summary of Chapter 17**

Good customer service takes training and effort and it is the responsibility of the manager to ensure that his or her facility offers a quality customer experience. This can be done by having a clear mission, vision and value system that is communicated through every aspect of your facility from maintenance to managers. Train employees to smile and treat customers how they would like to be treated. Communicate with customers and employees in a clear and friendly manor, listen effectively and empathetically, and gather feedback. Utilize conflict resolution techniques to keep customers happy and loyal to your facility. Customer service may seem like common sense, and for the most part, it is. However, it is essential to have the correct philosophy and training in place to empower employees to handle day to day interactions with customers as well as difficult situations.

