

SMALL Business Times

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Customer satisfaction

Well-served employees serve well

Question:

I lead a six-person sales department. The issue I'm struggling with is customer care. My major role is to drive accounts into our company. To do that, I spend a lot of time connecting with contacts and developing relationships. Once an account has come on board, most of the interaction comes through customer service. The account managers who work with customers generally do a good job. My concern is that we simply are not interacting with our customers enough. For instance, I might bump into a customer contact at a trade show, having not spoken with him or her in a year or more. At best, the account managers might have had a couple of check-ins during that time period. I'm never sure what I'm going to hear. Have we been doing a good job? Most of the time, I'm not sure because I don't interact with the account managers unless there is a problem. If I don't hear anything I'm assuming everything is fine, but I'm never really sure. I know we've lost some business to the competition because they emphasize face-to-face interaction. Last year was a really good year and 2007 is shaping up to be even better. We are bringing in more business every month. This only makes me think more about how we are going to provide good customer care to these accounts. Any suggestions?

Answer:

As I read your question, I immediately made the connection between "people practices" on the inside and "customer practices" on the outside. From my way of looking at it, outstanding service is not something that "just happens." Rather, expectations have to be set, behavior relative to those expectations must be monitored, feedback must be offered, and fine-tuning adjustments must be made, over time.

This is necessary because in today's competitive marketplace, outstanding service is something you have to offer all of the time, in each and every transaction, with all of your customers, external and internal. For that to happen with any degree of regularity, you need the right people, doing the right things, using the right processes and tools.

Within this article, then, I will spend some time exploring the connection between people and customer practices. Along the way, I'll also offer some particular thoughts regarding what you can do to augment your current customer service practices.

Let's start by examining why people practices are important relative to both internal and external customer service. Let me begin by observing that the most valuable assets you possess are your customers and employees. Think about it. Without those resources, what do you really have? Let me also observe that your employees represent your greatest opportunity to differentiate from the competition.

The bottom line is that your people work for you. The competition's people work for them. What enthusiasm, crea-

tivity, commitment, passion, empathy, etc. do your people bring to work? How concerned are they with providing exciting customer service to everyone with whom they have contact? How does that compare with what the competition's people offer?

You get the point, I trust.

You can go a long way toward differentiating from the competition by doing a better job of harnessing the full potential of your people. In the present example, harnessing the full potential of your people has stronger customer service as a focal point.

You might be asking yourself, "So, how do we go about doing that?"

My answer is, "You need to get ARMED!"

ARMED is an acronym that stands for Acquiring, Retaining, Managing, Educating and Developing. Want to offer better service? Then, make service the focus of your efforts in acquiring, retaining, managing, educating, and developing your employees.

For example, in our consulting practice at ODC, we have identified that sensitivity to customer needs and responsiveness in offering relevant solutions are two key competencies that correlate with exciting customer service. By identifying the specific characteristics associated with exciting customer service in your company, you, too, can get ARMED. You can then begin to aim your employment practices at these important business drivers.

The implication of ARMED, of course, is that it takes a comprehensive, systematic approach to bring out the best in people. Hiring talented people who are customer-oriented is not enough if they are

deployed in jobs that offer no training, ambiguous processes, no feedback, and apathetic management.

No, hiring the best is just the starting point. Then, you have to hone that talent, fine-tune it and make sure it is always being directed in organizationally important ways.

So, what can you do to augment your customer service practices? Let's re-visit your question for a moment. You allude to a lack of understanding as to what the account managers are doing relative to the accounts that have been brought in. Are the customers being served well? At the same time, you seem to be left in the dark, so how well-served are you by the account managers? How well-served are they by you? Remember, "People who are well-served will serve well."

Presupposing that the people you have on board are talented and reasonably satisfied with what they are doing, I wonder if they are being properly managed, educated and developed. In other words, you might be doing just fine with the first part of ARMED (i.e., acquiring and retaining) but not so well with the second part.

Let me pose a few questions that highlight what I was driving at with that last comment.

- Has the organization spent the time necessary to specify standards of customer service?
- Do those standards include expectations relative to meeting the needs of internal customers?
- If standards have been established,

has time been taken to modify performance management instruments so that they reflect the heightened focus on service?

- Has the organization invested in training for all employees relative to the idea that "Customer service is job number one around here?"
- Do managers and supervisors offer coaching and feedback to reinforce and nurture a pervasive service orientation?
- Does the organization measure its performance in the area of customer satisfaction?
- Does it do so at the individual, team/work area, and organization-wide levels?
- If measurement is undertaken, what criteria or standards of merit are applied?
- Are these internal or external standards?
- Are references made to established performance models and/or recognized frameworks?

As you can see in these questions, my perspective has a decided measurement bias. I strongly believe that you have to measure if you are going to cultivate a culture of service. There are, of course, a host of measurement options. Want to get a better handle on the service that is offered to internal customers? Then, measure things like morale, grievances, retention, participation, productivity, etc. Make use of surveys, focus groups, inter-

views, production records, etc.

Want to get a better handle on customer satisfaction and relative standing in the marketplace? Then, measure things like perceptions, opinions, complaints, returns, referrals, performance relative to the competition, the industry average, etc. Make use of focus groups, surveys, market research, industry indices, etc.

Perhaps this was a bit more than you bargained for in posing your question. But, I can't help myself. I just feel that strongly about service as the business driver in today's marketplace. It starts from within by setting high expectations for your people. It is demonstrated externally in exchanges that help your customers resolve their problems and meet their challenges – not just some of the time . . . but, rather, all of the time.

Ultimately, you'll know you've reached the desired end when you ask a customer what they think of your company and they reply, "Why, I couldn't imagine a world without it!"



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