

The Guest

R E P O R T

Service excellence

Toss away unhelpful scripts to improve customer service

Think of service as a giant TV screen. The guest or customer is holding the remote control, choosing which channels to watch or use. As the customer clicks buttons, sometimes there is static and sometimes there is the most beautiful picture in the world. Sometimes it takes forever to find the right channel and sometimes there's no sound. Sometimes the controls don't work. Sometimes the lips on the screen move without a sound.

What a service analogy, especially amid today's economic flux and customer dissatisfaction. What a service opportunity, for those who choose to plug into the big picture and introduce a prime time feature of service excellence.

Clear vision and connectivity are essential to achieving this big picture of excellence. Many organizations set up customer care and service departments, reservation and call centers, and guest service resources, yet they don't equip those personnel with the service behaviors that support their roles. They may provide minimal training or contract with an outside call center that takes orders instead of providing experience-based responsiveness. In the customer's mind, these departments may end up better named as the "Customer I-don't-care department," or "the Customer Disservice Center."

Take the customer with questions or challenges with products or services already ordered and purchased. Do your "customer service" personnel have the knowledge and resources they need to answer questions and actually help? Or are they simply order-takers, dependent on pre-existing scripts that provide answers the customer does not need or want? Do they have easy and readily available access to customer history information so they can immediately relate to customer questions? Are they quick to say "no" instead of "I don't know but let me find out"? Perhaps they place too much emphasis on efficient and productive calls while sacrificing responsive and solution-oriented customer service essential to the big picture.

Often, it takes the technical or service personnel who actually face and interact LIVE with the customer and who actually solve the problems, to compensate for the department that passed that customer on. They seem better equipped and sensitized to showing empathy, apologizing for any inconvenience, respecting customer time and responding knowledgeably about all facets of the situation. They reduce anxieties by addressing concerns directly and immediately coming up with solutions and answers. Unfortunately, many customers must go through the painful experience of "customer service" to get to them.

Today's prime time feature of service excellence depends on empathetic service personnel who guard the gates of service delivery. Empathy is hard to have when an employee has never seen or participated in any customer's experience. It appears that many organizations that hire personnel for customer service functions may not actually expose those new

employees to what really happens in the customer's mind. Orientation may include telephone-answering techniques and a written script instead of a thorough introduction to the essence of customer service. Without better connectivity and a panoramic vision of what the customer is going through and needs, the outcome is usually more time-consuming and costly for the company and less satisfying to the customer.

To better hire, train and manage the individuals who will fulfill these "customer service" roles, consider the following tips:

- Get an empathy reading before placing anyone in this position. Ask them to share their own anxiety-producing experiences and why they happened and what made them better. Find out if they can relate their own emotions to what might happen with customers or guests. Consider using predictive or personality testing in recruiting customer service personnel.
- Provide real customer experiences if possible. Have them go on a service call as part of their orientation or talk with service personnel about what makes customers happy and sad. A script alone will not cut it.
- Ensure that they have the full spectrum of options and possibilities for any customer situation. Develop and demonstrate a complete flow chart of each touch point that could take place in each customer interaction. Analyze how to prevent the negatives and protect the positives.
- Empower them to provide answers, not "no," "maybe" and undefined timeframes. Show them what "guest service" means and provide them with data, customer histories and the knowledge that will recognize a customer who has a track record and has been in touch before.
- Provide them with a vision for the best possible customer service outcomes. Reinforce an attitude of customer appreciation in each aspect of any customer call from the greeting, to listening, to responding, to a sincere "thank you." Show them how the slightest inflection and effort can make or break the best and worst situations. When they pass the baton, make sure it doesn't drop and that the transition is seamless. Make sure departments are not isolated from each other and understand how they have been cast for each scene.

Tune in to the big picture and make sure all channels are directed to award-winning performances. Customer applause, and dollars, are worth the effort.

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